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Never Stationary: examining the influence of creative destruction
in the work of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder.

Freyja Madsen

MPhil in American Literature

The University of Sussex

July, 2013.

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:F. Madsen

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

M.PHIL. IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

“NEVER STATIONARY: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF CREATIVE
DESTRUCTION IN THE WORK OF JACK KEROUAC AND GARY SNYDER.”SUMMARY

In this research I examine the influence that creative destruction had upon the work of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. My research aims to extend the work done by Philip Fisher in *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction*, by interrogating how Kerouac and Snyder's work was influenced by creative destruction in the post-war American economic climate. I will suggest that both the form and the content of Kerouac's prose replicate these economic patterns, reflecting his complicity with American consumer culture. Adequately analysing Kerouac's relationship with capitalist consumerism has enabled me to reevaluate critical portrayals of the author as a countercultural icon. However, my simultaneous examination of Gary Snyder's writing reveals a successful resistance to the corporate liberal culture of overconsumption, and to the cycles of creative destruction that created it. I suggest that Snyder's immersion in ancient or so-called "primitive" cultures informed his rejection of capitalist socio-economic patterns, and that this rejection shaped the economical poetic form that reflects his political beliefs. Following these arguments, my research demonstrates that whilst Snyder's political outlook led to an economical poetic style via an immersion in alternative cultures, Kerouac's proximity to the corporate liberal culture of overconsumption limited his countercultural potential, but also shaped the content and form of his spontaneous prose.

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Never Stationary: examining the influence of creative destruction in the work of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder.

Introduction.

This research extends chronologically from Philip Fisher's book, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction*. In this book, Fisher discusses mid-nineteenth century American literature in the context of "a technological world that accepts what the economist Joseph Schumpeter called 'creative destruction'"¹. Chapter One will provide a full explanation of creative destruction, but for clarity the concept that underlines Fisher's argument will be summarised here. Fisher claims that in America, each technological advance or artistic school is quickly obliterated by a host of innovative successors. Everything that is created, Fisher argues, is immediately placed under the threat of obsolescence. His book covers the period from roughly 1850 to 1940 and examines the work of writers such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman and John Dos Passos in order to ascertain how this constant cultural renewal manifests itself in literature. Fisher argues that rather than inheriting the customs, technologies and art forms of previous generations, each new generation of American citizens has the opportunity to start afresh. Instead of an inherited culture, he claims that America has a culture and an economy of creative destruction characterised by invention, innovation and immigration. Throughout his book, Fisher shows how American writing has been influenced by the unrelenting development of technology, and the economic situation that accompanies this development.

However, *Still the New World* ends its examination in roughly 1940 and therefore cannot devote space to a consideration of the distinctive economy which followed the Second World War. I will go on to demonstrate that this economy influenced the content and form of Jack Kerouac's work. Fisher's book thoroughly explores the effects of creative destruction in the work of writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Twain. However, it does not take into account how the American economy changed after the Second World War. Chapter One will demonstrate that by the middle of the twentieth century, cycles of creative destruction had wildly accelerated. My research will demonstrate that instead of providing cultural freedom, these cycles of

¹ Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 13.

rapid change coerced people into making strings of unnecessary purchases. By the 1950s, this economic pattern had resulted in a consumer society characterised by overproduction and overconsumption. Due to the changing pace of these cycles, it is necessary to re-evaluate how creative destruction functioned in mid-twentieth century America, before examining its effect on the literature of the day. What is not acknowledged by Fisher's book is that the role of creative destruction within an economy alters over time. *Still the New World* does not recognise that by the 1950s creative destruction had become a tool of the corporate liberal culture, which encouraged overconsumption and economic growth. Once creative destruction has been re-examined, it will be possible to uncover the effects it had upon writers such as Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder.

Currently, analysis correlating Beat literature and economic theory is sparse. I believe that this should not be the case, as the writings of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Snyder and their contemporaries repeatedly focus on the problematic aspects of a late capitalist economy.² However, whilst I believe that my application of creative destruction to both the content and form of Kerouac and Snyder's work is unique, this thesis is indebted to Eric Mottram's foremost work on beat literature, *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need*.³ Mottram's book explains that the "algebra of need", which operates within the dystopian world of Burrough's fiction, can be interpreted as a precise representation of late capitalist systems of consumer control. Mottram explains that the "ultimate state of power is central and recurrent in all Burroughs' writings – not a predictive nightmare but the present world condition of induced obedience to every kind of addictive authority from gods to drugs"⁴. In addition, Mottram examines Burroughs' "cut-up method"⁵, suggesting that these compositional techniques were attempts to undermine the dystopian culture of addiction that Burroughs perceived to have taken over mid-twentieth century America.⁶ My thesis aims to build on Mottram's seminal work, by

² In "My Alba" for example, Ginsberg laments "five years unhappy labor/ 22 to 27 working/ not a dime in the bank/ to show for it anyway" (Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1997* [London: Penguin, 2006], 97). The same despair is expressed in "Howl", which describes those "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (Ginsberg, 135). The introduction to Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch*, equates money with narcotics, stating "Opium is profane and quantitative like money" (William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch* [London: Corgi, 1959], 9). Similarly, their contemporary Gregory Corso described "a man pursuing the big lies of gold" in "Bomb" (Gregory Corso, *The Happy Birthday of Death* [New York: New Directions, 1960], between 32-33).

³ Eric Mottram, *The Algebra of Need* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1977).

⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵ Ibid., chapter II.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

reading the work of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder through a specific economic lens. By looking for patterns of creative destruction on both thematic and aesthetic levels, I aim to analyse how their writing responds to the creatively challenging environment of late capitalist America.

Surprisingly, few have followed Mottram's lead in connecting beat literature and economic discourse. An exception to this is Allan Johnston's 2005 article, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation." In this article, Johnston outlines the desire felt by writers such as Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac to "escape from socioeconomic conditions that the Beats felt subordinated the person to a world of consumer objects".⁷ My own thesis will go on to outline that, in Kerouac's case at least, escape was not always possible. Most space is devoted in Johnston's article to an interrogation of William Burroughs⁸ and Kenneth Rexroth, although Johnston ends the paper with an overview of other members of the movement, including Ginsberg, Kerouac and Snyder. He argues that the "analogy between capitalism and addiction becomes a leitmotif in Beat writing"⁹. This is something I will also go on to examine when I analyse Kerouac's frequent portrayals of the automobile in later chapters. However, I will also use an economic lens to analyse the form of Kerouac and Snyder's writing whereas Johnston's examination focuses primarily on the content of the work. This linguistic analysis will support my claim that Kerouac's prose often evidences the author's uneasy relationship with the consumerist system.

By following an economic line of investigation as I analyse the form and content of some major works of Beat literature, I intend to fill a current gap in Beat scholarship. Kerouac and Snyder provide apposite case studies for a number of reasons. To begin with, Kerouac's most famous novel glorifies the automobile, a product that I will examine throughout this research as a synecdoche for the consumer culture that was driven by cycles of creative destruction. If Kerouac's relationship with late capitalist consumer culture can be adequately analysed, it will be possible to dispel some of the myths that surround *On the Road*. Chapters One and Two will explore some of the misconceptions surrounding *On the Road* which have resulted from the portrayal of the

⁷ Allan Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation," *College Literature* 32, no.2 (Spring 2005): 107.

⁸ Johnston describes *The Naked Lunch* as a "comparison of advanced capitalist economics to addictive behaviour" (Johnston, 110.)

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

automobile as a symbol of countercultural rebellion. By instead interpreting the automobile as a symbol of late capitalist American consumerism, rather than a countercultural talisman, this research can begin to interrogate the symbolic importance of such products. It will then be able to uncover Kerouac's sometimes complicit approach to a consumer culture driven by cycles of creative destruction, and examine the extent to which this economic pattern influenced both the content and the form of his spontaneous prose. Snyder will be examined alongside Kerouac. Despite being Kerouac's contemporary and friend, Snyder's work demonstrates a strong resistance to the corporate liberal culture of overconsumption, and to the cycles of creative destruction that created it. I will examine how Snyder's cultural and economic awareness led to a rejection of late capitalist culture, and how this rejection shaped his poetic form. Chapter Three will interrogate how an immersion in ancient or "primitive" cultures informed Snyder's rejection of American late capitalism. Additionally, it will be important to consider Snyder as a potential teacher and guide for Kerouac. Chapter Four will examine *The Dharma Bums*, in which Japhy Ryder (a fictionalised Snyder) teaches Ray Smith (Kerouac's fictional counterpart) about an alternative Buddhist lifestyle. This research will examine Snyder as a restorative companion for Kerouac, contrasting him with the more malign presence of Neal Cassady. Chapter Four will then interrogate the competing influence of the two men, questioning whether Kerouac's eventual return to Neal's side represented a return to a lifestyle driven by a desire to consume. This research will demonstrate that whilst Snyder achieved personal liberation and a distinct poetic style through an immersion in alternative cultures, Kerouac's complicit involvement with the corporate liberal culture of overconsumption limited his countercultural potential, but also influenced the content and form of his spontaneous prose.

As there is not room here to scrutinize Kerouac's semi-autobiographical *Duluoz Legend* in its entirety, several books have been selected as the most appropriate sources. As stated, *On the Road* is of great use as it closely documents Kerouac's response to one of the most important products shaped and sold by creative destruction. Although the "Original Scroll" edition of the novel has now become readily available, all references will be made to the text as published in the standard version¹⁰. It is this edition that propelled Kerouac to fame in the fifties. As I will be considering reactions to the novel

¹⁰ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (1957; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1972).

along with the text itself, it is appropriate to reference the book as it was first published and read. In my study of Snyder, I will primarily be considering poems taken from *Riprap* and *The Back Country*, as well as prose pieces from *Earth House Hold* as these collections were composed contemporaneously with the Kerouac novels considered here. As a result, they provide a useful point of comparison, demonstrating two very different reactions to creative destruction and corporate liberal culture, despite being written at roughly the same time. Following the close examination of Snyder's form, Chapter Four will analyse Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*. The first of these provides an account of a prolonged effort made by Kerouac to entirely reject consumer culture, following Snyder's example. However, an examination of *Big Sur* will demonstrate that Kerouac's complete rejection of consumer culture was temporary. At times, other books such as *Desolation Angels* and *The Practice of the Wild* will be used to provide additional textual evidence, but the main analysis will centre on the three novels by Kerouac and the two collections by Snyder as mentioned above.

I have decided to address these books (and *On the Road* in particular) because, as my research will demonstrate, they are still plagued by misinterpretations that centre on Kerouac's relationship with American capitalism. However, my detailed exploration of these prose works means that, given the scope of this piece, I will not also be undertaking an extended study of Kerouac's poetry. Throughout this thesis, the expansiveness of Kerouac's prose will be invoked as proof of his involvement with the consumer mentality. This will then be contrasted with the economical phrasing of Snyder's verse. It must be acknowledged here that examining a mixed-genre corpus can be problematic. After all, formal constraints inherent in the genres of poetry and prose may amplify Kerouac and Snyder's existing stylistic differences. A consideration of Kerouac's experimental poem "Sea: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur" in my final chapter demonstrates that a study of Kerouac's poetry through the lens of creative destruction could produce a different set of results. It is my belief that this research could be extended to include a full examination of Kerouac's verse, which provides an interesting counterpoint to his spontaneous prose. In this instance, however, this thesis will focus more specifically on Kerouac's spontaneous prose in order to address misconceptions that still surround Kerouac's prose novels, and particularly *On the Road*. Additionally, whilst a comparison between poetry and prose may sometimes be problematic, it is helpful to contrast the *unusually* expansive nature of Kerouac's experimental prose with a contemporary who took a completely different stylistic

approach, not only to examine the extreme differences in form, but so that the socio-political motivations behind these distinct styles can also be examined, although it must be acknowledged that a study of Kerouac's poetry would provide a counterpoint to this, as I demonstrate in my final chapter.

Chapter One - Creative Destruction.

In *Still the New World*, Philip Fisher discusses the relationship between American literature and creative destruction. He argues that when Ralph Waldo Emerson was writing a

temporarily unfinished newness made it possible to sketch the philosophy for a new, permanently unsettled rhythm of creation and destruction. With the onset of a richly inventive modern technology that presumed destructive restlessness, along with an economy that was committed to giving free rein to that destructive restlessness, the possibility opened up that in American culture the initial, unfinished newness would define the terms of a more permanent newness guaranteed by the genuine permanent revolution, that of competitive technological capitalism.¹¹

Fisher states that in the mid-nineteenth century, a cyclical pattern of destruction and creation was established. He argues that as a result, American art has been constantly reinvigorated through the regular purge of outdated ideas. According to Fisher, this constant revivification was nurtured by the development of technological capitalism, which encouraged the destruction of the old to make space for an unending conveyor belt of new consumer goods. Fisher also states that “once under way, the rush to build or to level accelerated”¹². This research will demonstrate how these accelerated cycles of creative destruction formed the basis of the 1950s capitalist society, characterised by overproduction and overconsumption. Having established this historical background, I will go on to examine how Kerouac’s work was affected by his immersion in the twentieth century culture of creative destruction. Here and in subsequent chapters, I will also consider how Snyder managed to extricate himself from the same economic environment, looking at how his writing differs as a result.

Creative destruction in economics and Emerson.

The term *creative destruction* derives from Marxist economic theory and refers to the augmentation and annihilation of wealth under capitalism. However, it is more recently identified with the economist Joseph Schumpeter who popularised creative destruction

¹¹ Fisher, 3.

¹² Ibid., 4.

as a theory of economic innovation and progress. Schumpeter describes the concept in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*:

Capitalism, then ... not only never is but never can be stationary. ... The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumers' goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new methods of production or organization that capitalist enterprise creates. ... The history of the productive apparatus of a typical farm, from the beginning of the rationalization of crop rotation, plowing and fattening to the mechanized thing of today – linking up with elevators and railroads – is a history of revolutions. So is the history of the productive apparatus of the iron and steel industry from the charcoal furnace to our own type of furnace ... or the history of transportation from the mailcoach to the airplane ... This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.¹³

Schumpeter is describing the logical evolution and improvement of technology; the new replacing the old for efficiency's sake. However, cycles of creative destruction continue even when there are no genuinely useful changes to be made. Vance Packard explains the difference between creative destruction that improves a product (or "obsolescence of function",) and creative destruction which ensures that the consumer continues to make unnecessary purchases (or "obsolescence of desirability"):

The first type of obsolescence – the functional type – is certainly laudable when planned. We all applaud when piston-driven passenger planes are outmoded by swifter, quieter jet planes.¹⁴

To discuss obsolescence of desirability, Packard questions market researcher Louis Cheskin of the Color Research Institute,

who spoke frankly of the lack of significant improvement in United States products. He explained: "Most design changes are made not for improving the product ... but for making it obsolete."¹⁵

The very slight changes made to this surplus of new products are supposed to entice the consumer into making unnecessary purchases in an attempt to stay abreast of fashion. When this marketing technique is successful, the result is a consumer culture characterised by overproduction and overconsumption.

¹³ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942; repr., London: Routledge, 1992), 82-3.

¹⁴ Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

Returning to Fisher's examination of Emerson will demonstrate the extent to which unnecessary cycles of creative destruction had accelerated by Kerouac's lifetime. Fisher explains that Emerson's essay "Circles" is a description of the process that Schumpeter would later name creative destruction:

The circle is Emerson's term for this apparent completeness and perfection of the world just as it is now. We might choose to regard any change as a destruction of this perfect circle. Perhaps even our own birth is such a disturbance.

But then, in Emerson's image, we create a new and larger circle. A new idea or invention surrounds and dissolves the earlier fixed places for these limited facts. The new circle makes a new world. For Emerson steam is such a new idea. The railroad, ... the airplane, the personal computer, the Internet also count as new ideas in Emerson's sense.¹⁶

Although largely based on technological patterns, Fisher describes this process of innovation and replacement as natural. This is illustrated by Emerson's language. In Emerson's terms the process mirrors nature. Describing the cycles of creative destruction at work in his world, he explains that

Greek sculpture is all melted away, as if it had been statues of ice; here and there a solitary figure or fragment remaining, as we see flecks and scraps of snow left in cold dells and mountain clefts in June and July. ... The Greek letters last a little longer, but are already passing under the same sentence and tumbling into the inevitable pit which creation of new thoughts opens for all that is old. The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the foregoing. New arts destroy the old.¹⁷

Emerson describes a process of natural change. He talks of "decomposition" and of ice-like melting, comparing changes in art to the changing of the seasons. The Greek sculpture has not been forcibly shattered or suddenly broken; it has naturally eroded leaving a space to be occupied by another emerging art form. He also describes an organic process of cultivation where new continents emerge as if from a global compost heap, enriched by a slowly decaying past. However, by the time Kerouac was publishing his books, these cycles of creation and destruction had accelerated wildly. Writing about the 1950s, W. T. Lhamon Jr. describes the same process of creative destruction but in more violent terms:

¹⁶ Fisher, 16.

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, 3rd ed., ed. Larzer Ziff, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 226.

apocalypse is as much a beginning as an end. Cultural apocalypse is the moment in the cycle where the disruption occurs that powers the cycle, kicking it along, setting its spin, employing new bards and artists who can accommodate themselves to the constancy of the change.¹⁸

The difference is striking. Far from change being gradual and natural it has become dramatically destructive. This violent shattering of old ideas and technologies does not appear in Emerson's essay. In fact, when discussing the series of circles expanding outwards from each other, he never suggests that the original circle is destroyed. It's merely enclosed by the new circle that is drawn around it. So why does a description of the same process of creative destruction come to be described in such violent terms a century later? In Lhamon's account, innovation is generated by explosive kicks and spins rather than through the need to fill spaces naturally vacated by the decaying past. This apocalyptic violence is a result of the second form of obsolescence described by Packard, which fetishizes the new and denounces the old. It is the result of unnecessary creative destruction engineered by those wishing to sell a stream of products to a market already saturated with goods. To make buyers desire the newest surplus product, those marketing new products must vilify the old and the out-of-fashion, creating the illusion of a product becoming old before its time. Subsequently, they create a culture that must almost constantly reject and junk "old" products in order to keep up with the rate of consumption.

The plot of *On the Road* is a manifestation of the pattern of creative destruction in the twentieth century. Variations of the disconsolate refrain "everything was collapsing" reverberate throughout the novel, marking the end of numerous road voyages, each one a new attempt to secure a sense of satisfaction, each one failing. Each journey represents a new circle of potential (to borrow Emerson's term) but flashes by rapidly, ending in collapse, a rejection of old ways and a resolution to begin anew. The first instance of collapse occurs after a party. As Sal's group are getting ready to leave the shack in which they've been staying, Paradise notes, "everything seemed to be collapsing. As we were going out to the car Babe slipped and fell flat on her face ... The sad ride back to Denver began."¹⁹ The next couple of instances both occur at the end of Sal's sojourn with Remi Boncoeur: "everything began to collapse with Remi and Lee

¹⁸ W.T. Lhamon Jr, *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 124.

¹⁹ Kerouac, 1972, 55.

Ann and me”²⁰ and the desperate “everything was falling apart. My stay in San Francisco was coming to an end”²¹. The refrain is repeated as Sal prepares to leave Terry after their sojourn together. Once again he admits “everything was collapsing”²². Variations of the phrase continue to appear throughout the novel: “everything was mixed up, and all was falling”²³, “everything fell apart in me”²⁴ and finally again during a frantic night spent with Dean: “everything was collapsing”²⁵. Each collapse marks the close of a circle of potential. Again and again, Sal embarks on a new road adventure which he imagines to be filled with potential, but each journey ends collapse, disillusionment and the resolve to make a fresh start. This continual rejection of the past and insistence on beginning again reflect the aims of Emerson’s “Circles”, and Schumpeter’s capitalist manifesto. Although Kerouac may not have been aware of the term “creative destruction”, the plot of his most famous novel follows the economic pattern that shaped the American mid twentieth-century culture of overconsumption.

Creative destruction in corporate liberal America.

In *The Culture of Spontaneity*, Daniel Belgrad outlines the post-war consumer culture in which cycles of creative destruction had accelerated to such frantic speeds. He describes this as corporate liberalism:

Corporate liberalism is a social and economic arrangement that has predominated in the United States since the 1920s, replete with a value system that has been called “the culture of abundance.”... Corporate liberals instituted an “American Way of Life” defined by a complementary combination of scientifically managed work with mass leisure and consumption. High wages, vacation time, and instalment buying maintained a consistently high demand for industrial products, reversing the economic slump that had followed the end of the First World War ... Advertising and the mass media were instrumental as cultural proponents of the corporate-liberal system. Advertisements, mass-circulation magazines, Hollywood movies, and radio and television programs celebrated American technology and the suburban “standard of living.”²⁶

²⁰ Kerouac, 1972, 71.

²¹ Ibid., 75.

²² Ibid., 95.

²³ Ibid., 120.

²⁴ Ibid., 172.

²⁵ Ibid., 208.

²⁶ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3-4.

By 1960 the average American family endured 117 television and radio commercials a day.²⁷ These advertisements rarely flagged up innovations. More often than not they encouraged consumers to spend money on products they had no real use for, or to replace their previous models with newer editions made with minor, usually cosmetic, changes.

The corporate liberal society convinced consumers that the continuous outpourings of remodelled products were essential purchases. Providing the illusion of innovation and progress through cycles of unnecessary creative destruction ensured that citizens kept buying, and therefore working, in order to pay. Herbert Marcuse believed that these “false needs” stupefied workers, ensuring loyalty to the consumer society:

We may distinguish both true and false needs. “False” are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice. Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the whole and grasp the chance of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.²⁸

Marcuse and Packard both aimed to make consumers aware of the economic trap they had been lured into by those that profited from the mass-production of goods. I will go on to argue that Kerouac was not immune to this coercion. Some critics and historians have described Kerouac and his companion Neal Cassady as countercultural figures that represent resistance to 1950s social norms. Jane Holtz Kay, for example, optimistically claimed that on his cross country journeys, Kerouac “waved the flag of freedom”²⁹. Similarly, Omar Swartz claimed that “*On the Road* is about rejecting the commitments of marriage and commercialism.”³⁰ In some ways, Kerouac and Cassady did advocate a countercultural lifestyle. However, despite a relaxed approach to illegal substances and a

²⁷ Packard, 216.

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London: Routledge, 1964), 5.

²⁹ Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile took over America and how we can take it back* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 234.

³⁰ Omar Swartz, *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1999), 37.

rejection of monogamous lifestyles³¹, they too could become enchanted by a desire to consume. There are many occasions in *On the Road* where Dean Moriarty is affected by the “chronic itch” that Packard describes here:

The marketers of the United States ... sought to develop an over-all strategy that would make all the others more effective. They sought to generate a love for possessions and a zest for finding momentary pleasures. They sought to encourage Americans to break out of their old-fashioned inhibitions and to learn to live it up. All this, it was hoped, would produce a permissive mood for carefree buying. [An] approach used in promoting hedonism in the United States was to encourage, to a state of chronic itch, the tendency of Americans to love change in their lives. Anything “old”, “used”, or “permanent”, was to be disdained.³²

Dean Moriarty provides an excellent example of a consumer who falls for this marketing technique. In *On the Road* Moriarty is tempted away from calm domesticity and lured back to the road by a prominent symbol of mid twentieth-century consumer America, the automobile:

Dean had lived happily with Camille in San Francisco ever since that fall of 1947; he got a job on the railroad and made a lot of money. He became the father of a cute little girl, Amy Moriarty. The suddenly he blew his top while walking down the street one day. He saw a '49 Hudson for sale and rushed to the bank for his entire roll. He bought the car on the spot.³³

In the words of Dennis McNally, this “beautiful dark-silver 1949 Hudson Hornet” is the car that “snapped Neal’s resolve of virtue”³⁴. Here, Kerouac provides a clear illustration of how alluring new products entice consumers into spending their hard earned wages. What might seem like carefree hedonism is just what Packard is describing – an itch for change that can be easily scratched by newly modified products such as the automobile. It is important that the car in question is specifically a 1949 Hudson; just a page earlier Sal informed the reader that it was Christmas 1948. He then twice refers to that particular 1949 model. It is the attraction of the almost impossibly new car that captivates Dean and thus keeps the economy booming, as Packard describes:

³¹ Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990).

³² Packard, 159-64.

³³ Kerouac, 1972, 106.

³⁴ Dennis McNally, *The Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (London: Random House, 1979), 111-2.

The [American people] must learn to consume more and more or, they are warned, their magnificent economic machine may turn and devour them. They must be induced to step up their individual consumption higher and higher, whether they have any pressing need for the goods or not. Their ever-expanding economy demands it.³⁵

Dean is a vivid example of how crushing creative destruction can be when deployed in a consumer society. Although interpreted by some as a countercultural force (Michael Hrebeniak calls him a “virtuoso of revolt”³⁶ and Alix Brodie labeled him “the embodiment of rebellious countercultural urge”³⁷), it should be remembered that Dean remains deeply attached to American mainstream consumer culture. The same was true of his real-life counterpart, Neal Cassady as a glance at a 1952 letter to Kerouac demonstrates:

Since July my wages have been attached and I’ve bought necessary stove, refrigerator, wash machine and I’m 3000 bucks in debt. Sept 26th is the first paycheck I’ll have enough clear to even buy the 3 dozen light bulbs that this house needs.³⁸

However, even when Neal is in a desperate financial fix, he insists on satisfying that chronic itch with a new car. In a 1960 letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac relates how, even when he couldn’t afford rent, Cassady bought a new car:

Gave Neal money in crisis, he very glad now, crisis was solved and he got a fine new rubywine Jeepster with good motor – gave him 100 – (for rent)³⁹

In a 1948 letter to Ginsberg concerning the 1949 Hudson, Kerouac speculates on Cassady’s financial difficulties, concluding that all that matters to Neal is his car:

he traded his Ford and all his savings for the ’49 Hudson. That car is the greatest in the country in case you don’t know. We talked about it more than anything else. ... I know nothing. If he stole the car, or what’s with Carolyn, or his landlord, or something, or debtors (creditors?), and what’s with the cops, or that phoney address he

³⁵ Packard, 6.

³⁶ Michael Hrebeniak, *Jack Kerouac’s Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 28.

³⁷ Alix J. Brodie, “The Road Trip: hitting the road from modernism to postmodernism via the beat generation” (M.A. thesis, University of Sussex, 2007), 16.

³⁸ Neal Cassady, *Collected Letters, 1944-1967*, ed. Dave Moore (New York: Penguin, 2004), 332.

³⁹ Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1957-1969*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1999), 304.

wanted to send me. All I know is that he is tremendously excited about the car, and that “He’s off,” of course.⁴⁰

In another later letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac describes how Neal’s addiction to automobiles kept him working long, protracted hours:

Now he is all hungup on complete all-the-way-down-the-line materialistic money and stealing groceries anxieties and Nothing Else, positively. Carolyn has to stay in the house for months at a time while he works every day, 7 days on railroad and other jobs, to pay for things they never use, like cars.⁴¹

Cassady was aware of the problems his obsession caused. He did not, however, have the willpower to resist it, as he reveals in a 1948 letter to Jack:

Twenty years ago General Motors, Chevrolet division made a car with a 4 cylinder motor. I now own a copy of the same. The paint job is original, the motor’s original, the upholstery’s original, the wheel’s original, in fact, the only thing that didn’t come with the car when it left the factory in Flint, Michigan is the license plate. Price? Gulp – 225 dollars. How much have I paid? 100 dollars. Come to think of it, I’m not OK; I’m broke and in debt up to my ears. God bless the Capitalists.⁴²

Whilst this example admittedly shows Cassady lusting over an older model, it still demonstrates his unstoppable obsession with changing cars. In moments of clarity such as this, Cassady is aware of the precarious situation he puts himself in by continuing to scratch the chronic itch, but he still settles into a pattern of long working hours to purchase a conveyor belt of continually new cars, although admittedly his extreme devotion to automobile speed means that he destroys cars quicker than most other people, which only serves to entrap him more tightly within consumer culture. Readers can find several examples of this in *On the Road*. For example, when Moriarty collects Sal after Christmas 1948 in the anticipated Hudson, Dean’s frantic driving has already taken its toll on the car:

The heater was not working and consequently the windshield developed fog and ice ... the radio was not working. It was a brand-new car bought five days ago, and already it was broken. There was only one instalment paid on it, too.⁴³

⁴⁰ Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1940-1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1995[b]), 178-9.

⁴¹ Ibid., 350.

⁴² Neal Cassady, 75.

⁴³ Kerouac, 1972, 111.

A worse fate awaits the Cadillac picked up by Moriarty at a travel bureau. In his attempt to eek every possible iota of speed and excitement out of the car, Dean mangles it: “Not two miles out of Denver the speedometer broke because Dean was pushing well over 110 miles an hour”⁴⁴. By the end of their journey the car is a wreck, torn apart by Dean’s frantic, exciting driving:

At intermissions we rushed out in the Cadillac and tried to pick up girls all up and down in Chicago. They were frightened of our big, scarred, prophetic car. In his mad frenzy Dean backed up smack on hydrants and tittered maniacally. By nine o’clock the car was an utter wreck; the brakes weren’t working any more; the fenders were stove in; the rods were rattling. Dean couldn’t stop it at red lights, it kept kicking convulsively over the roadway. It had paid the price of the night. It was a muddy boot and no longer a shiny limousine.⁴⁵

Once it can no longer provide him with “kicks” Moriarty returns the car to the travel bureau and immediately sets out with Sal to find his next thrilling ride which arrives in the form of a Chrysler headed for New York. In her memoir, Neal’s wife, Carolyn Cassady corroborates that “Neal had gone through eighteen cars in less than two years”⁴⁶, making his apparently complete rejection of commercialism (as suggested by Omar Swartz⁴⁷) impossible.

Creative destruction and the automobile industry.

The mid-twentieth century American automobile industry is an excellent example of accelerated creative destruction. Peter Wollen describes how the industry shifted its focus from genuine mechanical improvement to unnecessary cosmetic changes implemented to entice reluctant consumers:

In 1925, the General Motors sales committee voted on a paper entitled “Annual Models versus Constant Improvement”, favouring annual models, voting for novelty rather than the status quo. Each year, there would be a new GM model looking different from the last. ... Rather than function, style was to become pre-eminent.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Kerouac, 1972, 212.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶ Carolyn Cassady, 376.

⁴⁷ Swartz, 37.

⁴⁸ Peter Wollen, “Automobiles and Art,” in *Autopia: Cars and Culture*, ed. Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr (London: Reaktion, 2002), 30.

Many historians confirm this focus on unnecessary remodelling, often highlighting the coercion of the customer. Cross and Szostak for example, explain that “slight changes in the appearance of fenders, headlights, and upholstery not only created interest in new models but also made owners of older cars feel obsolete and in need of an updated vehicle”⁴⁹. Similarly, John Rae describes these modifications as totally unnecessary, explaining that “most of the trappings were purely for show and had nothing to do with improving the vehicle’s qualities as a medium of transport.”⁵⁰ In *The Automobile Age*, James Flink also describes Sloanism, the form of creative destruction which characterised automobile production:

what Sloan chose to call “constant upgrading of a product” is more accurately described as planned obsolescence through cosmetic changes ... Sloanism also called for stimulating sagging sales in a replacement market by inducing the consumer, long before his present car’s usual life was over, to trade it in for a newer and higher-priced one.⁵¹

This explicitly outlines an economic landscape which encourages members to devote income to replacing an object that still functions perfectly. Vance Packard confirms these consumer habits in *The Waste Makers*, stating that “a survey made by a magazine for the mechanically inclined revealed that the typical American changed his or her car mainly for the sake of change. He wants a new one.”⁵² Packard’s own appraisal of the consumer culture is also critical of the automobile industry and the way in which it manipulated consumers:

By the early fifties ... the automobile industry was finding itself with fewer and fewer significant technological improvements that it felt were feasible to offer the public. Consequently, at all the major automotive headquarters ... more and more dependence was placed on styling. ... “New” became the key word as the manufacturers sought to make car owners feel like old fuds in any vehicle more than two years old.⁵³

The speed at which cycles of creative destruction were then unfolding meant that almost as soon as the consumer had purchased their shiny new automobile, another highly

⁴⁹ Gary Cross and Rick Szostak, *Technology and American Society: A History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 239.

⁵⁰ John Rae, *The American Automobile: a brief history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 209.

⁵¹ James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 234.

⁵² Packard, 165.

⁵³ Ibid., 79.

decorated model came along to render it passé. Matthew Paterson comments on the pressure placed on car consumers in *Automobile Politics*, stating that the car “plays a central role in *compelling* people to adopt this accelerated way of life.”⁵⁴ For example, it is the lure of a brand new 1949 Hudson that devours all of Dean Moriarty’s savings, earned on the railroad at the pace of four hundred dollars a month.⁵⁵ The poster advertisement for that model was emblazoned with the caption, “Hudson brings you the most of all you’ve wanted most!”⁵⁶ Consumers were offered visions of freedom and satisfaction to entice them into a system of purchases forced by rapid cycles of creative destruction.

It seems that despite not having a driver’s licence, Kerouac was keen to participate in automobile culture, (and therefore the wider culture of corporate liberalism) often romanticising both the experience of driving and the car itself. In an early letter to his friend Sebastian Sampas, for example, Kerouac describes the “satisfaction” he feels in manipulating a car:

parking cars sustains a certain aesthetic satisfaction, the subtlety of giving an inch’s grace to a sleek fender, and the exhilaration of jamming on the foot brake within certain disaster.⁵⁷

Writing to Allen Ginsberg at Christmas 1948, Kerouac expresses how excited he is about Cassady’s imminent arrival. However, the fact that Neal will arrive in the Hudson is the biggest excitement:

Neal is coming to New York.
Neal is coming to New York for New Year’s Eve.
Neal is coming to New York for New Year’s Eve in a ’49 Hudson.⁵⁸

There are many instances in *On the Road*, where Kerouac romanticises automobile travel. The exciting potential advertised by the Hudson poster is echoed in the Sal’s words as he and Dean “roared out of Testament” on the road again: “he and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there”.⁵⁹ However, the thematically repetitive nature of the plot implies that the “pearl” cannot be

⁵⁴ Matthew Paterson, *Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53.

⁵⁵ Kerouac, 1972, 105.

⁵⁶ Mike Evans, *The Beats: From Kerouac to Kesey, an Illustrated Journey through the Beat Generation* (London: Running Press, 2007), 64.

⁵⁷ Kerouac, 1995(b), 38.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁹ Kerouac, 1972, 131.

located with a car. As I have already explored, *On the Road* contains many examples of Sal ending a journey disappointed and disillusioned, shortly before convincing himself that the next voyage will be different. Still though, Sal and Moriarty continue to connect the car with excitement and potential. Dean seems to believe that with the right car all his problems will be solved, which he tells Sal as they drive across America in a borrowed Cadillac:

It was a magnificent car; it could hold the road like a boat holds on water. Gradual curves were its singing ease. "Ah, man, what a dreamboat," sighed Dean. "Think if you and I had a car like this what we could do. ... You and I, Sal, we'd dig the whole world with a car like this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world."⁶⁰

Whilst this trip may not resolve all of Dean's problems, and may once again end in dejection⁶¹, the pair sometimes experience revelations whilst on the road. For example, when immersed in the Mexican jungle Paradise lies in the hot dark amongst the insects and realises that "the jungle takes you over and you become it ... For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same."⁶² Here, being on the road has allowed Paradise to experience a deeper level of communion with the natural world. Whilst it is true that their journeys usually end in exhaustion and dejection, there remain valuable experiences and insights to be found on the road. However, as I have demonstrated the adventures in *On the Road* are framed within a pattern that suggests the futility of constant movement. When Carlo Marx questions Dean and Sal about their travels, he probes their assumptions about the true value of this escapist mobility:

"What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?"

"Whither goest thou?" echoed Dean with his mouth open. We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go.⁶³

⁶⁰ Kerouac, 1972, 216. See also 115 where Moriarty states "As we roll along this way I am positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us".

⁶¹ This trip ends when Dean and Sal return the mangled Cadillac to its owner (whereupon Sal says that he and Dean "shuddered in the raggedness" [Ibid., 228]) before taking a bus to Detroit in their once again "ragged and dirty" (Ibid, 229) state.

⁶² Ibid., 277.

⁶³ Ibid., 114.

Carlo not only addresses the pair but “America” as a whole. In doing so, he suggests that there are consumers all across the continent that share Dean’s belief in the automobile as an escape mechanism.⁶⁴ This realisation surfaces elsewhere in the Duluoz Legend. According to Manuel Luis Martinez for example, the car wreckage described in *Big Sur* signifies “Kerouac’s understanding of the failure of travel and movement not only on a personal level, but as a national motif”⁶⁵:

underneath the bridge, in the sand right beside the sea cliff, *hump*, your heart sinks to see it: the automobile that crashed thru the bridge rail a decade ago and fell 1000 feet straight down and landed upsidedown, is still there now, an upsidedown chassis of rust in a strewn skitter of sea-eaten tired, old spokes, old car seats sprung with straw, one sad fuel pump and no more people⁶⁶.

Automobile art.

The automobile is a common motif in mid-twentieth century American art. In 1957 (notably the year in which *On the Road* was first published), John Chamberlain began to include scrap metal from cars in his sculptures. For several years he created sculptures made entirely of crushed and welded automobile parts, creating forms which resemble the crashed car described in *Big Sur*. “Nutcracker”⁶⁷ for example, (created in 1958) is made up of twisted, compressed car panels. However, Chamberlain rejected any link made between his work and car wrecks⁶⁸. He exploited the violent effect of jarring colours to highlight the disjointed new form of material which started life as a sleek consumer product. By retaining the jagged edges and original colours of crumpled car parts, he interrogated the concept of the car as a desirable luxury object.

⁶⁴ By showing us that the “pearl” Dean and Sal search for cannot be secured using an automobile, *On the Road* may also indicate that the insights gained are more valuable than the unattainable “pearl” itself, a lesson which actually resists the habits of late capitalist acquisitiveness. Perhaps it is tensions such as this that fuel the enduring popularity of *On the Road*; rather than being a “guidebook for the restless” (Belgrad, 196), it is an account of the tensions experienced by a narrator positioned uncomfortably between both consumerist and spiritual compulsions.

⁶⁵ Manuel Luis Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 105-6.

⁶⁶ Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (1962; repr., London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 16.

⁶⁷ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, “John Chamberlain: Choices,” The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/chamberlain/#nutcracker> (accessed August 19, 2012).

⁶⁸ The Art Story Foundation, “John Chamberlain Biography,” The Art Story Foundation, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-chamberlain-john.htm> (accessed October 27, 2011).

Photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank (who was Kerouac's contemporary and friend), also documented this consumer obsession, making the automobile a primary theme in *The Americans*⁶⁹. Jonathan Day explains this centrality of the automobile in Frank's photography:

Central to the impact and success of *The Americans* is Frank's recognition and presentation of significant symbols which act to define America's emerging civilization. These include filling stations, diners, jukeboxes and, perhaps most eloquently of all, the automobile. Frank images cars that are present at conception, that serve as nannies and childhood friends, cars that facilitate romance, are the seat of great endeavour and the objects of worship, cars that perpetrate murder and become the conduits and memorials of the dead.⁷⁰

The Americans documents the importance of the car in everyday American life. Consider, for example, "Funeral – St. Helena, South Carolina". The photograph shows a group of black, male mourners. One young man stands in the foreground, closer to the camera than his companions. Two others lean against the bulk of a car. All men look off to the left at something outside of the picture's frame. The background of the shot is filled first with a line of cars, and behind that by a row of tall, rather dark trees. Despite the close proximity of the man in the foreground, the viewer's eye alights first on the cars behind the figures, attracted by the chrome highlights that announce themselves in a picture largely occupied by the darker tones of the men's skin and suits, and the trees looming above. Cars crowd the frame of this photograph, dominating its focus despite their position in the background. Day writes of this picture that "there is no perception of incongruity. The car is there at conception; it is there at commitment to the ground."⁷¹ The same could be said of "Public park – Ann Arbor, Michigan", which shows a public park on a sunny day. Once again the picture is filled with automobiles. A horizontal band of cars cuts the picture in half. The background shows a flood of bright sunlight between trees, and in the foreground, three young couples lie embracing on the grass. Despite the couples in the foreground, the photograph focuses on the cars, with one prominent model displayed centrally within the frame. Again, the highlights in the picture are the reflections of sunshine in the body of the car. The lovers on the grass

⁶⁹ Robert Frank, *The Americans*, (1958; repr., Zurich: Scalo, 1998). All photographs discussed are in this edition.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Day, *Robert Frank's 'The Americans': The Art of Documentary Photography* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 79.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

remain in the shade, somewhat dwarfed by their automobiles. Day discusses the important proximity of automobiles in this group portrait:

In *Public park, Ann Arbor, Michigan* semi-naked couples lie entwined between the vehicles that brought them to this place. The car at centre shot, with its door wide open, is at most a yard from its mating occupants. Parked on grass, the cars reflect the brilliance of the light between and behind the trees that surround them. The couples prefer the proximity of their vehicles to the brilliant clearing behind ... Frank has foreshortened his composition, creating a confusion of naked bodies and car parts. This lends the cars a looming, possessive quality.⁷²

This photograph is remarkably similar to a short piece composed by Kerouac which describes his journey with Frank. In it, Kerouac exhibits an awareness of the limiting effects of the American automobile obsession that is sometimes missing from *On the Road*. Here however, Kerouac is able to critique the American mania for cars:

Sunday, the road to Daytona Beach, the fraternity boys in the Ford with bare feet up on the dashboard, they love that car so much they even lie on top of it at the beach.

Americans, you cant separate them from their cars even at the most beautiful natural beach in the world, there they are taking lovely sunbaths practically under the oil pans of their perpetually new cars ... Critics of Mr. Frank's photography have asked "Why do you take so many pictures of cars?"

He answers, shrugging, "It's all I see everywhere...look for yourself."

Look for yourself, the soft day Atlantic waves washing in to the pearly flat hard sand, but everywhere you look, cars, fishtail Cadillacs, one young woman and a baby in the breeze to ten cars, or whole families under swung-across blankets from car to car camping in front of dreary motels.

The great ultimate shot of Mrs. Jones from Dubuque, Iowa, come fifteen hundred miles just to turn her back to the very ocean and sit behind the open trunk of her husband's car (a car dealer), bored among blankets and spare tires.⁷³

Clearly Kerouac recognises the extreme levels to which this automobile obsession has escalated in America, even pointing out the strange ritual of updating one's car so that it is "perpetually new". Frank's own persistent focus on the automobile in *The Americans* reveals its centrality in late capitalist consumer culture. Day explains that "as well as a

⁷² Day, 83.

⁷³ Jack Kerouac, *Good Blonde & Others*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994[a]), 30.

conduit, the car is also an icon, as important in America's new materialist religion as the flag, the jukebox or the gas station."⁷⁴ Rather than a symbol of countercultural freedom, the automobile becomes a synecdoche for a culture of overconsumption. By the mid-twentieth century the automobile had become, to borrow a phrase from historian Ruth Cowan, "like the Sorcerer's mop ... a desirable technology that has gotten out of hand."⁷⁵ No longer a luxury item, the car came to be perceived as a necessity by American consumers.

Recognizing the problems caused by this dependence on automobiles, Snyder also writes about the American obsession with cars, but from a highly critical perspective. Although he does not focus on the automobile as often as Kerouac did in *On the Road*, it is certainly one of the many aspects of the corporate liberal consumer culture that Snyder opposes. In his essay, "Four Changes", he explains his dislike of excessive car travel:

Cars pollute the air, and one or two people riding lonely in a huge car is an insult to intelligence and the earth. Share rides, legalize hitchhiking, and build hitchhiker waiting stations along the highways⁷⁶.

In contrast to Kerouac and Cassady, Snyder resists the tendency to romanticise the automobile, as is evidenced by the final stanza of "Marin-An", taken from *The Back Country*:

a soft continuous roar
comes out of the far valley
of the six-lane highway – thousands
and thousands of cars
driving men to work.⁷⁷

Discussing this, Timothy Gray tells us that

"Driving" can be read ambiguously in this context. Ostensibly, it means that cars transport men to work, but it can also mean that cars exhort men *to work*, in which case these automobiles emerge as the commodity fetish "driving" our desires and necessitating our daily labors. Whereas Snyder would rather hike the surrounding hills of Marin County, suburban commuters are intent on driving through the

⁷⁴ Day, 87.

⁷⁵ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 224.

⁷⁶ Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1995), 36.

⁷⁷ Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (1957; repr., New York: New Directions, 1971), 8.

landscape as quickly as possible and reaching their workplace on time. According to the specious consumer logic formulated by advertisers, these commuters will be truly successful so long as they work diligently enough to make more money and purchase the freedom represented by newer and faster models of automobile.⁷⁸

The myth of the liberating open road is debunked in “Marin-An”. Whilst considering the demands placed on the consumer by the automobile, Matthew Paterson questions the flawed belief that speed is symbolic of countercultural intent. Rather, he suggests, a lifestyle that takes time to consider and deliberate actions may present a more effective political challenge:

One of the main symbolisms of the counter-cultural movements was a valorisation of slow versus fast, while more recent social movements have similarly praised slowness as a self-conscious reaction to contemporary acceleration.⁷⁹

In its infancy, perhaps the automobile did mean liberty and freedom for the consumer. However, as the car became a commonplace purchase rather than a luxury item, roads began to fill and the freedom of the open road became a nostalgic myth. As Jane Holtz Kay explains, many Americans were soon too obsessed with their new purchases to question the politics of working to pay for them:

Material “progress” – refrigerators, washers, radios, televisions, toasters, and vacuum cleaners – excited the national passions more than Progressive politics. The children of the full-fledged auto age disowned betterment for speed, philanthropy for prosperity, and craftsmanship for technology.⁸⁰

Perhaps best exemplified by the automobile industry, the cycles of creative destruction driving the American economy had wildly accelerated over the century that passed between Emerson’s “Circles” and Kerouac’s *On the Road*. This chapter has explored how the plot of *On the Road* mirrors these cyclical patterns. The following chapter will expand this to consider whether it is possible to separate Kerouac’s spontaneous prose from the discourse defining the culture of overconsumption created by these cycles.

⁷⁸ Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Community* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 181.

⁷⁹ Paterson, 53.

⁸⁰ Holtz Kay, 172.

Chapter Two - “The senseless nightmare road”⁸¹: creative destruction in *On the Road*.

The previous chapter revealed that *On the Road*'s plot replicates the accelerated cycles of creative destruction which fostered the 1950s culture of overconsumption. Kerouac's instructions for writing –“Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” - can be used to further corroborate similarities between Kerouac's literary doctrine and this dominant economic pattern. Of course, readers should beware of uncritically applying Kerouac's “rules” as there are instances where the author strays from his own doctrine. It is clear for example, from the various drafts of what would become *On the Road*, that however emphatically he stressed it here, Kerouac did not always follow his own command of “no revisions”⁸². However, the “Essentials” still express Kerouac's literary ideals. These ideals will be probed later in this chapter. As I shall demonstrate, this manifesto reflects several of Kerouac's most important influences, such as the manifestos of André Breton and the early French Surrealists. However, Kerouac's own manifesto can also be interpreted as mirroring creative destruction, where the old is rejected and replaced by a newer, updated and therefore more appealing product. For example, Kerouac warns his readers against the use of old “dead”⁸³ language and “preconceived idea[s]”⁸⁴ which lead to an outdated prose style suffering from “literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition”⁸⁵ which he rejects in the shorter but similar piece, “Belief & Technique for Modern Prose”. It is important to note that in many of his books, such as *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac actually worked in a fairly traditional grammatical style, although he does begin to employ his “vigorous space dash”⁸⁶ in place of a colon or a comma⁸⁷. However, even if Kerouac sometimes diverted from his own rules, his

⁸¹ Kerouac, 1972, 239.

⁸² Kerouac, 1994(a), 70.

⁸³ Ibid., 70.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁷ It could be argued that discussing the *Essentials* in connection with *On the Road* is problematic, because it doesn't embody Kerouac's writing at its most experimental. However, I have outlined my reasons for selecting *On the Road* in my introduction, and I believe it would be remiss to exclude the manifestos from this study, because they demonstrate that a variety of influences shaped Kerouac's work. Whilst the *Essentials* and *Belief & Technique* reflect the patterns and motivations of creative destruction, they also reflect the avant-garde and their anti-conformist creative techniques. Thus, a short study of the manifestos in their own right is illuminating because it reveals the paradoxical connections between some of Kerouac's most important influences. However, it is true that in works such as *Visions of Cody* and *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac achieves a more mature expression of his own manifesto, and therefore an examination of these would provide a more expansive appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of

continued insistence upon them here shows a commitment to the belief that value lies in invention and novelty, a belief also propagated by the late capitalist culture in which creative destruction maintained economic health.

The desire for new literary forms is of course typical of the avant-garde, and certainly cannot be attributed to the beat generation or to Kerouac alone. Indeed, Laurence Goldstein describes how creative destruction or “Sloanism” was also a feature of the literary avant-garde community:

Who could appreciate more than poets the artful variations on standardized models emerging from Detroit year after year? Alfred Sloan, Jr., writing about dynamic obsolescence in *My Years with General Motors*, might almost have been discussing the reconstitution of poetic genres in some little magazine like *transition* or *Broom*: “The changes in the new model should be so novel and attractive as to create demand for the new value and, so to speak, create a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the past model.” This new version of the Metamorphoses would profoundly affect all the arts by bringing to them the anxiety of novelty that characterises modernism itself.⁸⁸

This chapter will go on to discuss whether or not Kerouac’s attempt to scratch the “chronic itch”⁸⁹ of boredom through reinvention, speed and mobility differed to the use of reinvention, speed and mobility in the work of his avant-garde predecessors. In doing

Kerouac’s stylistic ideals. Whilst there is not the room enough to undertake such an examination here, the manifestos will still demonstrate the particularly paradoxical nature of Kerouac’s theory of spontaneous prose.

⁸⁸ Laurence Goldstein, “The Automobile and American Poetry,” in *The Automobile and American Culture* 4th ed., ed. David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), 232. At this point it is important to define my use of the term avant-garde as distinct from modernity and modernism, which Goldstein uses here. I use the term avant-garde as defined by Matei Calinescu, who also explains the differences between modernism (or modernity) and the avant-garde: “The avant-garde is in every respect more radical than modernity. Less flexible and less tolerant of nuances, it is naturally more dogmatic – both in the sense of self-assertion and, conversely, in the sense of self-destruction. The avant-garde borrows practically all its elements from the modern tradition but at the same time blows them up, exaggerates them, and places them in unexpected contexts” (Matei Calinescu, *Fives Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* [1977; repr., Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999], 95-6). Richard Murphy also distinguishes the avant-garde from modernism by focusing on the ideological aims of the two groups: “what distinguishes the avant-garde from modernism in general is its institutional awareness: firstly, unlike modernism the avant-garde not only renovates the means but also deconstructs the *ideology* of art, while reflecting upon those social demarcations of culture for which modernism seems to show a complete lack of awareness or interest” (Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 258). Murphy develops this distinction when he argues that “the avant-garde’s interrogation of the institutional definition and function of art reveals the pervasive influence of the institution upon the work’s reception, upon its meaning and upon its production” (Richard Murphy, 24). Keeping in mind this interrogative ability, this chapter will examine the use of speed, mobility, and reinvention as opposition techniques in the work of Kerouac and the avant-garde and question whether these aid or impede the critique of dominant social discourses such as late capitalist consumerism.

⁸⁹ Packard, 164

so, it will be necessary to consider the political position of *On the Road*. Primarily this will be done by examining how the form and the content of the novel reflected Kerouac's proximity to the culture of overconsumption that was founded on a pattern of creative destruction.

Speed, mobility, and reinvention in Kerouac and the avant-garde.

Peter Nicholls describes creative destruction as a “paradox which was to have a long and distinguished avant-garde career.”⁹⁰ He explains that “the continental avant-gardes had defined modernism as a phenomenon of rupture, the absolutely ‘new’ appearing over the corpse of the old”⁹¹. Similarly, Matei Calinescu argues that by the 1920s, the aesthetic program of the avant-garde was “defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and by the cult of the new”⁹². Indeed, from Ezra Pound's central imperative, “make it new”, to Charles Olson's “Projective Verse”, the quest for newness is shared by and inspires many. Perhaps Kerouac's own desire to “make it new” is not very different. However, this chapter will go on to explore how Kerouac's work reveals the paradoxical nature of certain avant-garde opposition techniques based on creative destruction and speed. It will demonstrate that a reliance on these methods risked linking writers to the capitalist culture of overconsumption, which the avant-garde tried to oppose. The Beats' own paradoxical relationship with consumer culture is summarised by Franca Bellarsi, who explains how their subjective mysticism sometimes brought the Beats closer to elements of the American mainstream:

The Beats immersed themselves in the material world and in the present moment as gateways to the sacred, actively pursuing any avenue that might favour this immersion by lessening the rational ego's ability to filter the real: hallucinogenic drugs, cool jazz and bebop, automatic writing, the *acte gratuit*, Buddhist meditation, travel to “primitive” cultures etc. Paradoxically thus, in its response to the Cold War and materialistic values that it saw as pervading the American mainstream, the Beat rebellion remained very much one “made in U.S.A.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 29.

⁹¹ Ibid., 276.

⁹² Matei Calinescu, *Fives Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977; repr., Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 117.

⁹³ Franca Bellarsi, “‘Death to Van Gogh's Ear!’ The Beat Generation and Its Surrealist Politics of Mysticism,” *Cahier voor literatuurwetenschap*, 25 (2005): 88.

I would argue that automobile speed should also be included in this list. The next few pages will demonstrate that, for Dean and Sal, automobile speed often provides the same ecstatic response as bebop and “fellahin” travel.

Along with much of the avant-garde, Kerouac would valorise speed in his work. This can frequently be seen in *On the Road* when Sal Paradise gleefully describes the “fastest, whoopingest ride of [his] life”⁹⁴, or in the following passage, where he marvels at Dean’s ability to catapult them across the continent in record time:

When daybreak came we were zooming through New Jersey. ... We swished through the Lincoln Tunnel and cut over to Times Square ... Dean had come about four thousand miles from Frisco, via Arizona and up to Denver, inside four days, with innumerable adventures sandwiched in, and it was only the beginning.⁹⁵

The previous chapter demonstrated that Kerouac’s fascination with speed and mobility result in part from his desire to satisfy the “chronic itch” described by Vance Packard.⁹⁶ This chapter will demonstrate that in Kerouac’s instance, a focus on speed cannot be entirely divorced from the materialist mainstream culture.

The belief in the value of speed and mobility is perhaps best expressed in Sal’s ecstatic response to his departure south to see Old Bull Lee, accompanied by Dean Moriarty:

We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one noble function of time, *move*. And we moved! We flashed past the mysterious signs in the night⁹⁷.

This valorisation of speed is shared by much avant-garde literature. Valéry Larbaud for example, produced poems which, according to Nicholls, “record a life of international travel and pleasure, striking a deliberately modern note in their celebration of speed and movement”⁹⁸. Take, for example, the opening stanza of Larbaud’s “Ode”:

Lend me your great sound, your great and gentle motion,
Your nighttime glide across illuminated Europe,
O deluxe train! And the heartbreaking music
Sounding along your gilt leather corridors,

⁹⁴ Kerouac, 1972, 98.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁶ Packard, 159-64.

⁹⁷ Kerouac, 1972, 127.

⁹⁸ Nicholls, 79.

While behind lacquered doors with latches of heavy brass
 Sleep the millionaires.
 I go humming down your corridors
 And I follow your run to Vienna and Budapest,
 Mixing my voice with your hundred thousand voices,
 O Harmonika-Zug!⁹⁹

Nicholls also emphasises the importance of travel and “the open road” in Larbaud’s poetry, which are features Larbaud shared with Kerouac:

The listing of places in the poems, part of the tourist’s itinerary, recalls the catalogues of Whitman, from whom Larbaud has learned the lesson of the open road as an authentic alternative to the “narrow life” of those who ... remain in one place. But this is no fantasy of simple vagabondage; the freedom to travel is nothing without the ability to purchase.¹⁰⁰

Michael Hrebeniak provides another striking example of the avant-garde focus on speed and mobility when he draws comparisons between the Italian Futurists and Dean Moriarty, both of whom are fascinated by “wild transit”:

Dean’s fascination with the epic insurgence of wild transit thus replays the Italian futurist celebration of masculine speed, noise, and death ... Indeed Marinetti’s 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism* could double as a prospectus for Kerouac’s Dionysian star, promising regeneration in devouring ecstasy¹⁰¹.

This is evidenced perfectly by Marinetti’s thrilled description of the beauty of speed, in a proclamation even more ecstatic than those made by Dean Moriarty:

We believe that this wonderful world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed. A racing car, its bonnet decked out with exhaust pipes like serpents with galvanic breath ... a roaring motorcar, which seems to race on like machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Valery Larbaud, *The Poems of A. O. Barnabooth*, trans. Ron Padgett and Bill Zavatsky (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁰⁰ Nicholls, 80. Later I will also examine how Kerouac’s ability to purchase allowed him to boost his view of mobility as restorative by fleeing to Mexico.

¹⁰¹ Hrebeniak, 43-4.

¹⁰² F. T. Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 13. The Winged Victory of Samothrace is a celebrated Hellenistic sculpture of the Greek Goddess Nike.

In addition to a love of speed, the Italian Futurists also advocated extreme cultural creative destruction. For example, in the 1909 manifesto, Marinetti derides the preservation of art and cultural artefacts in museums and galleries:

We want to free our country from the endless number of museums that everywhere cover her like countless graveyards. Museums, graveyards!...They're the same thing, really, because of their grim profusion of corpses that no one remembers...Admiring an old painting is just like pouring our purest feelings into a funerary urn, instead of projecting them far and wide, in violent outbursts of creation and of action.¹⁰³

Whilst a similarly ecstatic response to speed is obvious in Kerouac's work, he is not passionately vitriolic about a denunciation of the past. However, creative destruction does shape the plot of his most famous novel.

As Chapter One demonstrated *On the Road* is comprised of a series of voyages ending in destruction and "collapse". This plot mirrors the accelerated cycles of creative destruction that coerced Americans into funding the corporate liberal culture of overconsumption. In one of the introductory essays to the Original Scroll text, Joshua Kupetz explains how Kerouac's cyclical plot structure "appropriates his concept of a 'circle of despair.'"

According to Kerouac, the circle of despair represents a belief that "the experience of life is a regular series of deflections" from one's goals. As one is deflected from a goal, Kerouac explains, he or she establishes a new goal from which he or she will inevitably also be deflected.¹⁰⁴

Although Kerouac may not have known it, this serves as a succinct explanation of the control of 1950s consumer culture through creative destruction. Commercial powers like the Hudson car company implant in consumers the "chronic itch" to change that Vance Packard described. Readers witness how Sal is distracted from the reality of a domestic life with his aunt by the opportunity for change that automobile travels offers, although this change rarely proves fruitful. When heading toward San Francisco with Dean and Marylou, Sal ruminates,

¹⁰³ Marinetti, 14-5.

¹⁰⁴ Joshua Kupetz, "'The Straight Line Will Take You Only to Death': The Scroll Manuscript and Contemporary Literary Theory," in *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, ed. Howard Cunnell (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 89.

I was going to be left alone on my butt at the other end of the continent. But why think about that when all the golden land's ahead of you and all kinds of unforeseen events wait lurking for you and make you glad you're alive to see?¹⁰⁵

The problems surrounding this temporary escapism were also documented by Robert Frank, as critic Jonathan Day explains:

Travel is a metaphor for change. It is the signifier of progress, of movement, the constant incremental approach towards the gates of paradise. Frank clearly echoed this in *U.S. 285 – New Mexico*. For people tied to endless repetitive work and a daily struggle for survival, like the woman in *Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey*, travel even for one day a week, could represent an escape from the dreariness of everyday life.¹⁰⁶

Kerouac however, does not always confront this reality. Again and again Sal and Dean hurtle away on the road, distracted from the domestic existence that makes up the other half of their lives. During one of his early trips with Moriarty, Paradise comments that

Just about that time a strange thing began to haunt me. It was this: I had forgotten something. There was a decision that I was about to make before Dean showed up, and now it was driven clear out of my mind¹⁰⁷.

The thought is “*driven*” out of his mind; the arrival of Dean and the whirlwind speed of their automobile adventures have distracted Sal. There are certainly moments where Paradise recognises the disruption caused by these voyages and regrets it. Having planned a trip to Italy with Dean (which will never happen), he resolves that “we were going to do everything we’d never done and had been too silly to do in the past. Then we promised ourselves two days of kicks in San Francisco before starting off”¹⁰⁸. Once again, the men’s desires for speed and change are more powerful than their ambitions. Fifty pages later the continued search for these planned “kicks” has exhausted Sal who “realized [he] was beginning to cross and recross towns in America as though [he] was a travelling salesman – raggedy travellings, bad stock, rotten beans in the bottom of [his]

¹⁰⁵ Kerouac, 1972, 128.

¹⁰⁶ Day, 90.

¹⁰⁷ Kerouac, 1972, 118.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 180.

bag of tricks, nobody buying.”¹⁰⁹ This part of the novel ends there, with Sal sadly listing Dean’s problems and lamenting that they “didn’t go to Italy.”¹¹⁰

These evasive searches for ecstasy repeatedly end in collapse, so that the book is haunted by an air of failure and exhaustion. Tim Hunt discusses this pattern in his study of *On the Road*:

Viewed from Sal’s perspective, each trip shows a common pattern. Sal begins by breaking out of an established routine or order in search of kicks and the knowledge of time. He then proceeds through a series of road experiences that end in vision, exhaustion, and a return to the established order. Sal flees the order of his aunt’s home, enters the disorder of the road and returns at the end of each trip to figure his losses and gains.¹¹¹

Warren French also describes this cyclical pattern of excitement and dejection that shapes *On the Road*:

Each of the four major parts of the novel describe one of Sal’s road trips, referencing Kerouac’s own major ventures between 1946 and 1950. Each of these parts follows a remarkably similar pattern leading to identical conclusions. Each begins with Sal tired and depressed and seeking an escape from a troublesome or boring situation in his “other life”. He at first takes to the road slowly and cautiously, but as he gains confidence and becomes energized by this new life, the action accelerates until it reaches a high point at which a disappointing experience causes things to fall to pieces, and Sal returns home (often slinking there) dejected and depressed again.¹¹²

Given this pattern of reoccurring failure and despair, it is clear that *On the Road* is not primarily a joyous celebration of the liberating aspect of mobility. French continues,

On the Road is thus not, except at occasional moments early in each of its four major parts, a carefree, upbeat promotion of an irresponsible life on the road that presents a formidable threat to the traditional American way of life; rather it is a distinctly downbeat work ... The conclusion is foreshadowed and reinforced by the movement of each of the four major parts from beginnings full of happy anticipations through periods of frenzied excitement to depressing conclusions portraying characters’ frustration and exhaustion. ... Far from inciting the reader to hit the road, *On the Road* proves a traditional cautionary tale, warning readers about the sorry nature of the world. It promises

¹⁰⁹ Kerouac, 231.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 233.

¹¹¹ Tim Hunt, *Kerouac’s Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 23.

¹¹² Warren French, *Jack Kerouac* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 38.

the reader nothing but disappointment and disillusionment. Although this is not the way the novel has usually been described it is supported by a careful analysis of the narrative.¹¹³

Indeed, careful analysis of the narrative will reveal that *On the Road* reflects the reality of life in late capitalist American culture, where consumers are lured into paying for the newest, fastest models. Quoting the 1933 President's Research Committee on Social Trends, Jane Holtz Kay documents how the automobile had become fully entrenched in the heart of the American consumer, linking them inextricably to a capitalist system of consumption:

"Imperceptibly, car ownership has created an 'automobile psychology,'" the committee noted. "The automobile has become a dominant influence in the life of the individual and he, in a real sense, has become dependent on it."¹¹⁴

Yet despite pointing out the dependency and financial problems that came with automobile ownership as a part of the consumer culture, Holtz Kay still insists on reading *On the Road* as an expression of uninhibited freedom:

Jack Kerouac wrote about hitting the highway in *On the Road* ... Moving briskly, hitching, or sallying forth in a "toolshack on wheels" - whatever, wherever, crossing and recrossing America - he waved the flag of freedom¹¹⁵.

This analysis does not acknowledge that the automobile industry was a thriving part of capitalist consumer culture. Instead of providing a mechanism for countercultural escape, the speeding automobile served to entrap consumers such as Dean Moriarty in the economic cycles at work in American corporate liberal culture. Holtz Kay is by no means the only critic to persist in reading Kerouac's novel as a countercultural call-to-arms. Deborah Paes de Barros for example, describes automobile travel after the Second World War as offering "a speedy, and indeed a glamorous escape from social conformity"¹¹⁶:

alienated from a culture of materialism and boosterism, some intellectuals rebelled, leaving a counter-culture legacy that would be

¹¹³ French, 42-3.

¹¹⁴ Holtz Kay, 196.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 233-4.

¹¹⁶ Deborah Paes de Barros, "Driving that highway to consciousness: late twentieth-century American travel literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 228.

called “The Beat Generation.” They drove their cars, not to impress or acquire or to arrive somewhere better, but to escape normative culture and to exist in the moment.¹¹⁷

Despite the obvious despondency in *On the Road*, Daniel Belgrad also chooses to describe it as a “guidebook for a restless ‘beat generation’”¹¹⁸. It may be true that Kerouac and his contemporary Beats sought flight from the social mainstream, but their choice of the automobile as a chariot affiliated them with the lifestyle advocated by corporate liberalism. In her lectures about *On the Road*, Amy Hungerford rightly draws attention to Kerouac’s complicity with the “culture of materialism and boosterism”:

What I’m suggesting is that [*On the Road* is] structured around a very deeply embedded American cultural trait of consumption ... Kerouac tells us a story that is not so much about the escape from an American consumer culture of the post-war period, as it is a story about the absolute immersion in a culture of consumption.¹¹⁹

The example Hungerford uses to illustrate this is the refrigerator Sal purchases for his aunt at the end of the book’s first section. She describes this item as a “symbol of middle class American domesticity” and explains that far from being “repelled by materialism”¹²⁰ as Paes de Barros argues, Sal Paradise is a “happy participant in this new purchase”. One can see here that, far from rebelling against the corporate liberal culture fuelled by advertising and consumption, Paradise is often quite untroubled by it. Hungerford rightly points out that as well as including “symbol[s] of middle class American domesticity”, the structure of *On the Road* also reflects the habit of overconsumption. However, in her lectures Hungerford stops short of exploring how an immersion in American consumerism is also reflected in the style of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose. In her second lecture, Hungerford does describe the shape of Kerouac’s prose, claiming that it is “the dream of Kerouac’s language is to pour experience into language and make language immediate.” She takes the novel’s lengthy closing sentence as an example of this, describing how Kerouac has “blasted open the syntax of that sentence [and] piled clause upon clause, upon clause, phrase upon phrase, to include that whole road”. She does not, however, point out that this massive accumulation of words, (which Kerouac himself referred to as “the infantile pileup of

¹¹⁷ Paes de Barros, 229.

¹¹⁸ Belgrad, 196.

¹¹⁹ Amy Hungerford, “Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* continued – The American Novel Since 1945” (lecture, Yale University, accessed via iTunes U on April 3, 2011[b]).

¹²⁰ Paes de Barros, 230.

scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained”¹²¹) also stylistically reflects the obsessive accumulation of goods which was characteristic of American capitalism in the 1950s. This idea will be explored at length at the end of this chapter, and will be returned to when Kerouac’s form is contrasted with Snyder’s in Chapter Three, as it suggests a proximity to the accumulative capitalist drive in Kerouac’s work, even when he is not writing about symbols of materialism such as the refrigerator and the automobile.

Despite these materialist talismans however, Cynthia Dettelbach offers us another escapist reading of *On the Road* when she claims that, “Kerouac, as Dean’s companion and chronicler, spins an exuberant, affirmative book”.¹²² There are certainly exuberant passages in *On the Road*, but they are inevitably followed by passages of dejection. For example, when Sal speeds off towards Old Bull Lee’s house, he opens the voyage with optimistic, almost ecstatic proclamations about the value of movement.¹²³ However, Sal is soon driven away from Old Bull’s by Dean’s restless energy. It is Old Bull who describes to Sal the economic pattern of creative destruction, in this vitriolic piece of social criticism:

“Why, Sal, do you realize the shelves they build these days crack under the weight of knickknacks after six months or generally collapse? Same with houses, same with clothes. These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last *forever* ... Same with clothes. They can make clothes that last forever¹²⁴.”

Old Bull is Kerouac’s representation of William Burroughs, author of *The Naked Lunch*. This critique of consumer culture is central to much of Burroughs’ writing which, Eric Mottram points out, aims to “analyse and expose power and the meaning of the idea of ‘freeing the human spirit’.”¹²⁵ In *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need*, Mottram describes the economic situation (characterised by cycles of unnecessary creative destruction) which Burroughs (and his fictional counterpart Old Bull) rails against:

As institutions support endless acquisition of profit, competition and mobility, with change promoted for the sake of the economy’s insistent ethic, so human values of kindness and generosity, individual

¹²¹ Kerouac, 1994(a), 69.

¹²² Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach, *In the Driver’s Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture* (London: Greenwood Press), 35.

¹²³ Kerouac, 1972, 127.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 142.

¹²⁵ Mottram, 270.

creativity and love, are diminished. ... This is not a dream future created by science fiction: it is the image of the present.¹²⁶

Mottram also stresses that although Burroughs landscapes may be dystopian and “complex”, they comment on contemporary life:

Like Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* ... Burroughs’ tetralogy¹²⁷ is about existence not in the future but today. ... The shock tactics have a purpose: to provide a weapon against “total need”, against addictive totalitarianism in all its forms.¹²⁸

This “total need” that must be resisted is described by Burroughs as the “algebra of need”. In the introduction to *The Naked Lunch* Burroughs describes it as an addiction so strong that it “knows absolutely no limit or control ... You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need.”¹²⁹ In this instance, the product under discussion is heroin but as Burroughs himself points out, “there are many forms of addiction [and] I think that they all obey basic laws.”¹³⁰ Indeed, Burroughs describes Neal Cassady as acting in exactly this way, claiming that like the archetypal addict Cassady is “compulsive, dedicated, ready to sacrifice family, friends, even his very car itself to the necessity of moving from one place to another. Wife and child may starve, friends exist only to exploit for gas money. Neal must move”.¹³¹ In *The Naked Lunch*, Burroughs presents his readers with extreme versions of addiction, but the same pattern of consumption is present in the wider capitalist society that placed such a high value on material acquisitions. Neal Cassady, for example, is overwhelmed by the desire to satisfy the “chronic itch” described by Vance Packard. Most often, he achieves this through careering across America in a car. Mottram explains that Burroughs “presents truths about our damaged lives which few people have the courage and the information to consider.”¹³² Old Bull’s diatribe in *On the Road* implies that Burroughs passed some of these truths on to Kerouac. Like Japhy Ryder would later do for Ray Smith, Old Bull exposes Sal Paradise to a critique of late capitalist economics. Paradise however, cannot resist the charms of Dean Moriarty, and reluctantly leaves Bull to return to the road.

¹²⁶ Mottram, 80.

¹²⁷ *The Naked Lunch, The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded and Nova Express.*

¹²⁸ Mottram, 113-4.

¹²⁹ Burroughs, 9.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

¹³¹ Burroughs quoted by Ann Charters in *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 109.

¹³² Mottram, 46.

Almost immediately, he encounters the weariness and exhaustion that is also found on the road alongside the promised ecstatic release:

I stared at the car; it was stuck in the mud a foot deep. I sighed in the rainy Texas wilderness ... We woke up Marylou to these horrors and made her gun the car while we pushed. The tormented Hudson heaved and heaved. Suddenly it jolted out and went skidding across the road. ... That was that – the work had taken thirty minutes and we were soaked and miserable.

I fell asleep, all caked in mud; and in the morning when I woke up the mud was solidified and outside there was snow. We were near Fredericksburg, in the high plains. It was one of the worst winters in Texas and Western history, when cattle perished like flies in the great blizzards and snow fell on San Francisco and LA. We were all miserable.¹³³

This exhausting side of the road is ignored by critics such as Dettelbach and Paes de Barros, even though this thematic repetition of hope and joy fading into weary dolefulness suggests to the reader that exuberance is temporary.

As Paul Virilio writes in *Speed and Politics*, “revolution is movement, but movement is not revolution.”¹³⁴ Discovering a lasting, positive value of mobility in *On the Road* is difficult. The beat generation may have been unorthodox in some social practices, but Kerouac’s particular response to the automobile limited his countercultural potential rather than fortifying it.

Discussing Kerouac specifically, Manuel Luis Martinez interrogates the sometimes deceptive nature of personal mobility:

That a system’s elements move does not necessarily mean the system is itself “open”, or that the system is not dictating the nature of such movement. What is the nature of mobility in a system that allows only a dictated, plotted out movement? It is the paradox to which Kerouac gives voice in his body of fiction. ... The illusion of personal mobility becomes the illusion of an independence apart from systematic constraint¹³⁵.

An examination of *On the Road* provides a useful starting point from which to interrogate the avant-garde use of speed and mobility as opposition techniques. Additionally, this research has shown that by the middle of the twentieth century, the avant-garde also shared the “make it new” imperative with late capitalist consumer

¹³³ Kerouac, 1972, 151-2.

¹³⁴ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 3rd ed., trans. Marc Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 43.

¹³⁵ Martinez, 13.

culture. Andreas Huyssen discusses the ramifications that this connection had for the artistic avant-garde:

Despite the power and integrity of its attacks against traditional bourgeois culture and against the deprivations of capitalism, there are moments in the historical avant-garde which show how deeply avant-gardism itself is implicated in the Western tradition of growth and progress. The futurist and constructivist confidence in technology and modernization, the relentless assaults on the past and on tradition which went hand in hand with a quasi-metaphysical glorification of a present on the edge of the future ... all these phenomena reveal the secret bond between avant-garde and official culture in advanced societies.¹³⁶

It has been demonstrated that the avant-garde use of speed, mobility and reinvention placed them in a paradoxically close relationship with twentieth century mainstream capitalism. However, so far I have only considered the use of speed, mobility and reinvention in a thematic sense. These features must now also be considered as elements of compositional technique and as stylistic features. In order to do this, the next section will consider one of Kerouac's primary avant-garde influences, the early French Surrealists.

Shaping Spontaneous Prose.

In an article exploring the links between the Beat Generation and the early French Surrealists, Franca Bellarsi explains why the American writers were drawn to the avant-garde movement led by André Breton.¹³⁷ Bellarsi suggests that when the Beat Generation came together in New York in 1944, the Surrealist presence was strongly felt in the city where many prominent members had temporarily exiled themselves having fled Nazi-occupied France. Additionally, Bellarsi points out that Beat Generation included writers, such as Kerouac and Ferlinghetti, who were fluent in French and therefore able to read the Surrealist literature in the original. Bellarsi suggests that the Beat Generation writers were "particularly drawn to the medium-like nature of the 'automatic writing' technique that typified the early French Surrealist quest"¹³⁸. Indeed, as Bellarsi goes on to suggest, there are a great number of similarities in both the content

¹³⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 173.

¹³⁷ Bellarsi, 2005, 92

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

and language of Breton's 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism" and Kerouac's own manifesto, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose". In Bellarsi's words, both pieces "attempt to reduce the gap between perception and its couching on the page as much as possible"¹³⁹. This is partly achieved by composing at great speed. For example, when describing a first attempt at automatic writing, Breton states that they "were trying to obtain ... a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to *spoken thought*."¹⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Breton describes the Surrealists as "we, who have made no effort whatsoever to filter, who in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest recording instruments who are not mesmerized by the drawing we are making"¹⁴¹. Compare this as Bellarsi does, with Kerouac's MENTAL STATE commandment:

If possible write "without consciousness in semi-trance"...allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so "modern" language what conscious art would censor¹⁴².

Elsewhere, Kerouac also advocates the use of compositional speed, suggesting that there should be "no pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained"¹⁴³. Both Kerouac and Breton instruct their reader to suspend inhibitions and the ego, in order to produce writing that is not hampered by accepted social discourse. Other striking similarities can be found between the two manifestoes. For example, Breton explains that "punctuation no doubt resists the absolute continuity of the flow with which [they] are concerned"¹⁴⁴. Kerouac offers the slightly more extreme but very similar suggestion, "no periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas"¹⁴⁵. Bellarsi also points out a particularly striking similarity that occurs when comparing Breton's section entitled "Written Surrealist composition or first and last draft" to Kerouac's CENTER OF INTEREST tenet¹⁴⁶. Breton instructs, "write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what

¹³⁹ Bellarsi, 2005, 94.

¹⁴⁰ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (1962; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 23.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

¹⁴² Kerouac, 1994(a), 70.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴⁴ Breton, 30.

¹⁴⁵ Kerouac, 1994(a), 69.

¹⁴⁶ Bellarsi, 2005, 95-6.

you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written."¹⁴⁷ Kerouac expands this in his own commandment:

Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion – Do no afterthink except for poetic or P.S. reasons. Never afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind”¹⁴⁸.

The similarity is obvious here and, as Bellarsi notes, “it seems highly improbable that these parallels between the ‘automatic writing’ of the Surrealists and ‘the sketching composition of the Beats should be all purely coincidental.”¹⁴⁹ She goes on to develop this comparison, focusing on the use of speed by both Breton and Kerouac:

Echoing Surrealist experimental practice...the brief nine sections of “Essentials”...provide compositional advice which privileges speed and the chance factor in composition”¹⁵⁰.

This use of compositional speed (which Bellarsi describes as being of “paramount importance”¹⁵¹ to Breton) offers an interesting counterpoint to my thesis thus far. I have already demonstrated that a thematic focus on speed and mobility links Kerouac’s work to mainstream capitalist discourse. In a compositional context, however, speed helps avant-garde writers to create an uncensored prose that mirrors the activity of the liberated consciousness. Richard Murphy explains that the ability to access “a new multiplicity of consciousness” was one of the great strengths of the avant-garde, because it enabled “an awareness of areas previously excluded from that view of the world which is ideologically sanctioned by the dominant social discourses”¹⁵². Therefore, by valorising speed as a compositional method, Kerouac may have been able to partially extricate himself from the influence of the late capitalist dominant social discourse.

However, in remaining “submissive to everything, open, listening”¹⁵³, Kerouac also remained open to the influence of late capitalism. I have demonstrated how this

¹⁴⁷ Breton, 29-30.

¹⁴⁸ Kerouac, 1994(a), 70.

¹⁴⁹ Bellarsi, 2005, 94.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵² Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 44.

¹⁵³ Kerouac, 1994(a), 72.

influence manifests in the thematic content of Kerouac's prose, but it is also visible in the form of his writing. Describing the writing of *On the Road* to Neal Cassady, Kerouac explained that he had "telled all the road now. Went fast because road is fast."¹⁵⁴ Hungerford suggests that in order to keep pace with the experiences in *On the Road* (which are often undertaken in a speeding car) "language has to be wrenched out of its conventions; syntax can be set aside"¹⁵⁵, pointing to novel's extremely long closing sentence as an example of this. By the novel's close, Sal has so completely absorbed the pace of "all that road going" that even when he is not writing about his activities on the road itself, the automobile speed is reflected in the syntax that Hungerford describes as "blasted apart"¹⁵⁶. Marinetti provides an avant-garde precedent for this. The Futurist (who also valorised the thrill of automobile speed) claimed that a successful writer should be able to "burst the conduits of the sentence, the valves of punctuation, and the adjustable bolt of adjectivization. Handfuls of essential words in no conventional acceptable order."¹⁵⁷ Kerouac's STRUCTURE OF WORK tenet includes some of those "fistfuls of essential words in no conventional order". It also bursts the so-called valves of punctuation, producing an idiosyncratic syntax:

Follow roughly outlines in outfanning movement over subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your mind over it, once) arriving at pivot, where what was dim formed "beginning" becomes sharp-necessitating "ending" and language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle¹⁵⁸.

Michael Hrebeniak also describes the way Kerouac's spontaneous prose represents speed, explaining that

syllables are skipped and connectives and qualification phrases are dumped, all to vary the pace of the meter ... Gerund is also a feature,

¹⁵⁴ Kerouac, 1995(b), 315.

¹⁵⁵ Amy Hungerford, "Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* – The American Novel Since 1945," (Lecture, Yale University, accessed on iTunes U on April 3, 2011[a]).

¹⁵⁶ Hungerford, 2011(b)

¹⁵⁷ Marinetti, 123.

¹⁵⁸ Kerouac, 1994(a), 70. Whilst this particular tenet may reflect the motion of a speeding automobile, this is not so for each of the nine tenets comprising the "Essentials". The opening instruction "SET-UP" advocates an almost meditation-like state where the writer focuses deliberately on an object for a sustained period. "SCOPING" also suggests a similarly contemplative study, where the writer free associates images. Kerouac also suggests that they should "fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first", implying a prolonged searching activity quite unlike the violent verbal somersaults advocated by Marinetti. Similarly, "PROCEDURE" and "TIMING" both discuss working in time as the essence of good writing, but neither suggest that this time should be accelerated to the frantic pace suggested by the Futurist.

augmented by nouns and adjectives jammed together: the German-style compounds of Dean's "loveproblems"¹⁵⁹.

These compounds are certainly significant. Other examples occur in Kerouac's letters ("carbumming"¹⁶⁰) and elsewhere in *On the Road*, for example when Sal Paradise asks "what of the others and all the soundmaking?"¹⁶¹ However, they are important not just because they vary the meter but also because they stylistically preserve speed in Kerouac's prose form. In an attempt to keep up with the pace of experience Kerouac yokes words together, combining images and actions so that they rush past the reader in blurred combinations as images would past the windows of the speeding Hudson.

However, Kerouac's spontaneous prose form does not only replicate his preoccupation with speed. It also reflects the presence of overconsumption and overproduction in late capitalist American culture, which was driven by accelerated cycles of creative destruction. James T. Jones expresses this when he states that

on the most obvious level, spontaneity represented a reaction against the rigid social mores of the developing suburban culture. Yet on another level, Kerouac's compositional method simply imitated – or perhaps parodied – the culture in which it developed. The torrent of words loosed by the spontaneous method effectively mimics 1950s overproduction. To make the product easily available, you must produce more of it than is actually needed. A good deal of waste results.¹⁶²

This prose form registers the influence of overproduction through lexical pileups. Rather than pausing to deliberate over the choice of a word, Kerouac piles together all of the terms which come to him, a method he described to Al Aronowitz in a 1959 interview:

Sentences are stumbling blocks to language! Who in the hell started this sentence business? Like, John Holmes, I've watched him write. He writes on a typewriter so fast, but he gets stumped – he can't think of a proper word. I don't do that. If I can't think of the proper word, I just do bdlbdlbdlbdlbdlbdlbdl. Or else, bdlbdlbluuuuuh.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Hrebieniak, 133.

¹⁶⁰ Kerouac, 1995(b), 419.

¹⁶¹ Kerouac, 1972, 226.

¹⁶² James T. Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 146-7. There is another factor that should be briefly considered here. I shall later argue that Snyder's knowledge of classical Chinese poetry influenced his own poetic style. Kerouac was bilingual, and fluent in joul French. It may be that Kerouac's heavily ornamented prose was the product not only of the influence of the culture of overconsumption, but also of his early familiarity with the more expansive French language.

¹⁶³ Al Aronowitz, "St.Jack (Annotated by Jack Kerouac)," in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Kevin Hayes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 16.

There are many instances in Kerouac's work where he accumulates words. Perhaps Kerouac exaggerates somewhat here but even *On the Road* (which is relatively conservative in its experimentation with form in comparison to works such as *Visions of Cody*) contains examples of these lexical pileups. For example, when waiting for the travel-bureau's Cadillac to arrive, Sal Paradise describes how he "fell asleep from sheer horror exhaustion"¹⁶⁴. In particular, Kerouac tends to create strings of adjectives and adverbs, as in his description of Hollywood Boulevard as "a great, screaming frenzy of cars"¹⁶⁵ and in the following description of George Shearing playing at Birdland:

He was a distinguished-looking Englishman with a stiff white collar, slightly beefy, blond, with a delicate English-summer's night air about him that came out in the first rippling sweet number he played¹⁶⁶.

Kerouac's fondness for adjectival pileups will be looked at again in Chapter Four, which discusses *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*. The next chapter, however, will contrast the adjectivally adorned prose discussed here with the economical form of Snyder's poetry. Whilst I will demonstrate how Snyder's economical poetry corroborated his anti-consumerist political stance, the comparison will also further illuminate Kerouac's paradoxical relationship with the late capitalist culture of overconsumption, which his prose form often reflects.

However, when making such comparisons it must be remembered that words are the subject, and that these are by their very nature different from manufactured goods. Whilst a study of Kerouac's spontaneous prose (and in particular his "Essentials") allows a simile to be drawn between the artefacts of literature and more tangible artefacts of the consumer culture, Kerouac's manifesto in particular also reflects a different accumulative drive which he shared with the Surrealists, namely that of human consciousness which seeks an abundance of perceptions and experience.

This reading of Kerouac's spontaneous prose and particularly his "Essentials" has demonstrated the paradoxical role speed plays in avant-garde literature. A compositional use of speed allowed writers like Kerouac and Breton access to a multiplicity of consciousness, which in turn allowed them to reject the limitations of the dominant social discourse. In contrast, a stylistic and thematic representation of speed in

¹⁶⁴ Kerouac, 1972, 211.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 122.

Kerouac's work reflects the economic patterns associated with that dominant discourse, indicating a sometimes uncomfortable proximity to the mainstream materialist culture.

Mexico, money and mobility.

Despite this proximity and the problems surrounding speed and mobility as escape techniques, *On the Road* shows Kerouac trying to bolster his belief in the value of his own mobility. Through sojourns into “fellahin”¹⁶⁷ lands and through the adoption of marginal identities associated with “fellahin” people, Kerouac attempts to demonstrate his independence from mainstream consumer society. Martinez explains this self-preservation technique:

the American writer mythologizes movement as a strategic form of self-preservation, at voyage's end sure to be rewarded by his return home to his fixed (e)state. The voyage is undertaken through the land of the marginal ... Once that marginality is appropriated, and a liminal state achieved, the voyager may return to his place within the system, newly assured that he is not at all constrained.¹⁶⁸

Kerouac portrayed Mexico as providing temporary escape from the late capitalist society which continued to promote overconsumption. Mexico, on the other hand, was imagined by the author to be free from the social stresses associated with corporate liberal America. James T. Jones claims that for Kerouac, Mexico “served as a vantage point from which he could observe the frantic doings of the civilized world and provided a garret in which [he] could write in peace.”¹⁶⁹ Carolyn Cassady confirms this, explaining that to Jack, Mexico “seemed to represent a Utopian existence without hassles, a timeless peace.”¹⁷⁰ This rejection of frantic mobility is described several times by Kerouac. In “Mexico Fellaheen”, Kerouac describes the calm, timeless feeling he believes to be associated with marginal, “fellaheen” cultures:

It's a great feeling of entering the Pure Land [Mexico], especially because it's so close to dry faced Arizona and Texas and all over the Southwest – but you can find it, this feeling, this fellaheen feeling about life, that timeless gaiety of people not involved in great cultural and civilization issues¹⁷¹.

¹⁶⁷ Kerouac, 1972, 264.

¹⁶⁸ Martinez, 13.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, 52.

¹⁷⁰ Carolyn Cassady quoted in Charters, 454.

¹⁷¹ Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (1960; repr., London: Grafton Books, 1988), 27-8.

Describing Mexico, Kerouac notes the “drowsy hum of Fellaheen Village at noon”¹⁷², the “quiet buses”¹⁷³ and a “drowsy sweet little grass hut village”¹⁷⁴. This is a world away from Kerouac’s portrayal of America in the middle of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by this passage describing Times Square:

I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling for ever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream – grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying¹⁷⁵.

Whilst still within the perimeters of frantic America, Kerouac manages to locate the calm existence he associates with Mexico by making a companion of Terry, the “cutest little Mexican girl”¹⁷⁶. Shortly after meeting her, Kerouac ruminates over the slowness of Terry’s actions, contrasting her calm demeanour with his harried paranoia:

She was slow and hung-up about everything she did; it took her a long time to eat; she chewed slowly and stared into space, and smoked a cigarette, and kept talking, and I was like a haggard ghost suspicioning every move she made, thinking she was stalling for time.¹⁷⁷

Initially, Sal finds it inconceivable that anyone could move this way. This relaxed pace is a welcome alternative to the frantic scramble of Dean and Sal’s lives. Similarly Moriarty is taken aback by the meandering life he encounters in Mexico. Describing their impromptu guide, Victor, he says “Just look at him, look at his cool slow walk. There’s no need to hurry around here.”¹⁷⁸ During their short time together, Sal attempts to adopt Terry’s pace. The altered descriptions of cars in this passage of the novel are testament to Paradise’s temporary rejection of the frantic pace associated with life in late capitalist America. Rather than focusing on the thrilling experience of car travel, he describes cars as an invasion into the peace of everyday life. Whilst negotiating Hollywood’s Sunset and Vine with Terry, he describes the snarling, speeding mass of cars they encounter, calling Hollywood Boulevard “a great, screaming frenzy of cars;

¹⁷² Kerouac, 1988, 28.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷⁵ Kerouac, 1972, 102.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 78.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 266.

there were minor accidents at least once a minute; everybody was rushing off towards the farthest palm – and beyond that was the desert and nothingness.”¹⁷⁹ With Terry as his companion instead of Dean, Sal sees the pointless frenzy associated with the overconsumption, here metaphorically represented by the chaotic mass of cars. During the time he spends in Terry’s company, the automobile remains a metaphor for all that capitalist America has to offer, but having reduced himself to Terry’s economic level, the automobile now also emphasises how far down the ladder of capitalist accumulation Paradise has fallen. Having worked for a day picking cotton, Paradise returns to Terry aching and disappointed, and lamenting his failure to earn a sizeable wage. His disappointment peaks when he finds himself surrounded by other people’s automobiles, which highlight his inferior economic position:

At the end of the field I unloaded my burden on a scale; it weighed fifty pounds, and I got a buck fifty. Then I borrowed a bicycle from one of the Okie boys and rode down 99 to a crossroads grocery store ... LA-bound traffic zoomed by; Frisco-bound harassed my tail. I swore and swore. I looked up at the dark sky and prayed to God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something for the little people I loved.¹⁸⁰

Having linked himself to what he imagines is Terry’s meandering, fellahin existence Paradise begins to view the car as a luxury item, ignoring the fact that he has regularly traversed the continent in one himself. When they are passed on the road by cars full of high-school kids, Sal rails against their financial and domestic security:

Suddenly cars full of young kids roared by with streamers flying ... I hated every one of them. Who did they think they were, yaahing at somebody on the road just because they were little high-school punks and their parents carved the roast beef on Sunday afternoons? Who did they think they were, making fun of a girl reduced to poor circumstances with a man who wanted to belove?¹⁸¹

Paradise seems to have temporarily forgotten both the convenience of automobile speed and the comfortable family home which he will return to at the end of this part of the novel. Before long Sal tires of his newly impoverished lifestyle. Describing brief happiness with Terry, Kerouac writes “The days rolled by. I forgot all about the East and

¹⁷⁹ Kerouac, 1972, 83.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 85.

all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road.”¹⁸² These words reveal an animosity towards the lifestyle which will soon draw him away from his fellahin lover, but despite his clear understanding of how draining it will be, Sal cannot help but return to “the bloody road”. On the very same page he admits “I was through with my chores in the cottonfield. I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back.” It does not seem overly cynical to point out that this “pull” surfaces just after the cold weather arrives and the rent for the tent is due. For Sal, all it takes to escape is sending off a penny postcard to his aunt, asking her for “another fifty”, a vast amount in comparison to the meagre dollar and a half he earned to spend on groceries. Manuel Luis Martinez discusses this abandonment of Terry, suggesting that before long the hardships of her life proved unpalatable to Sal:

although Kerouac suggests that Paradise is leaving because he feels guilt, I suggest that it is also a response to the reality of migrant work, the underside of a mobility that does not allow for free movement ... More important, by leaving when it appears his mobility may be threatened, he is able to recreate the most liberating of moves – escape.¹⁸³

This escape comes in the form of “the fastest, whoopingest ride of [his] life”¹⁸⁴, an ecstatic response which reveals his willingness to embrace his old lifestyle immediately. Paradise later claims that his “white ambitions” were the reason he abandoned “a good woman like Terry”¹⁸⁵. It is clear that Sal’s time with Terry is only a temporary excursion. He adopts her lifestyle briefly before returning to the comfort of his family home. The section ends with Sal returning to his aunt and her well stocked icebox, whereupon she and Paradise “decided to buy a new electric refrigerator with the money [he] sent her from California”¹⁸⁶ as if to celebrate his return to a higher level of economic functioning.

For Terry, the “poor circumstances” Sal describes are a constant reality. Sal, on the other hand, temporarily adopts them to satisfy his desire to escape into a marginal existence before deciding to return to a life of relative financial privilege. Martinez claims that Kerouac’s ability to adopt ethnicities at will as he does here (“They thought I

¹⁸² Kerouac, 1972, 94.

¹⁸³ Martinez, 90.

¹⁸⁴ Kerouac, 1972, 98.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am”¹⁸⁷) depends upon his economic position within this consumer-driven society:

Kerouac’s facility for taking on liminal identities is based on his assumed right to trade, to exchange, to try before he buys ... Much as the logic of 1950s merchandising replaced freedom with product choice, liberty for Kerouac is trying on different ethnic garb.¹⁸⁸

However, when going into Mexico itself, Kerouac no longer needs to adopt an ethnicity to achieve (temporary) liberation from the oppression he encountered in late capitalist America. In the penultimate part of the novel, Sal and Dean take off on the road to Mexico with a friend. On this trip Paradise does not try to immerse himself in the poverty experienced by the Mexican people he meets. Instead, he takes full advantage of his (relatively) elevated economic position, paying for all the “kicks” that Mexico can offer. In a moment of cultural lucidity Kerouac describes himself and his friends as “ostensibly self-important moneybag Americans on a lark in their land”¹⁸⁹. Instead of discovering a land free from the controls of corporate liberal culture, when Sal and his companions arrive in Mexico they find themselves within another consumer system, where their American money has secured them superior economic status. Rachel Adams explains that on arrival in Mexico, “instead of a conflict between wilderness and civilization, they find competing versions of modernity.”¹⁹⁰ If Kerouac experiences liberation in Mexico, it is not a result of a reconnection to fabled fellahin wilderness, free from corporate liberal control and cycles of creative destruction. It is because he is in a position of economic superiority. It is the travellers’ exchanged American currency that allows them to follow their hedonistic pursuits, which they could not afford so readily in America:

We bought three bottles of cold beer – *cerveza* was the name of the beer – for about thirty Mexican cents or ten American cents each. We bought packs of Mexican cigarettes for six cents each. We gazed and gazed at our wonderful Mexican money that went so far, and played with it and looked around and smiled at everyone.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Kerouac, 1972, 94.

¹⁸⁸ Martinez, 91.

¹⁸⁹ Kerouac, 1972, 264.

¹⁹⁰ Rachel Adams, “Hipsters and *jipitecas*: Literary Countercultures on Both Sides of the Border,” *American Literary History* 16, no 1 (Spring 2004): 59-60.

¹⁹¹ Kerouac, 1972, 259.

Adams claims that “Sal is just as excited by the quantity of pesos he receives for his dollars as what they can buy. The exchange value of money suddenly takes a back seat to the infantile pleasure of possessing the coins themselves.”¹⁹² However, the fact that beer can be bought for the equivalent of ten cents amazes him. The most exciting thing about the magical Mexican money is the fact that it “went so far”, allowing Sal and his friends to play at being rich in Mexico. There is pleasure in possessing the coins simply because they are talismans representing Paradise’s temporary wealth. Suddenly, it is as if he and his companions have climbed the capitalist ladder and are nearer to achieving the goals advocated by late capitalism. In a letter to Carolyn Cassady, Kerouac describes the economic advantages of being an American in Mexico, luxuriating over financial details and exchange rates:

If you want to live in Mexico all you gotta do is work about 4 months on railroad per year, everything here incredibly cheap, more than I thought, Bill lives expensively in American neighbourhood, you can live for nothing in Mexican neighbourhoods in the city ... Food is low...I buy 2 and a quarter pounds of filet mignon (2 ¼ is a kilo) for 11 pesos or 11x12 cents or \$1.34 American dough, this is therefore FILET MIGNON 60 cents a poundhamburger here is only 18 cents a pound CIGARETTES 6 cents a pack RENT \$20 a month ICE POP FOR THE CHILDREN 1 cent ICE CREAM CONE FOR POPPA CASSADY 3 cents or 6 cents large¹⁹³.

Yet despite Paradise’s relationship with consumer culture (even in a supposedly “fellahin” place like Mexico), critics have still persisted in reading *On the Road* as a manual for countercultural change: Ann Charters reports that “the Village Voice reviewer took the novel as ‘a rallying point for the elusive spirit of rebellion of these times.’”¹⁹⁴ Lhamon goes so far as to claim that *On the Road* was “an iconographic celebration of consuming energy on vanishing two-lane backdrops”¹⁹⁵. I have demonstrated that moments of celebration are in fact fleeting in the book. Whilst the beginning of each voyage may be wreathed in optimism, on each occasion this rapidly fades, giving way to apathy or depression. Rather than a celebration of countercultural dissent, *On the Road* is a lament for the predicament of the consumer.

¹⁹² Adams, 63.

¹⁹³ Kerouac, 1995(b), 362.

¹⁹⁴ Kerouac, 1999, 73.

¹⁹⁵ Lhamon, 5.

Chapter Three - Gary Snyder: “leaving things out at the right spot”.¹⁹⁶

This chapter will consider Gary Snyder in greater depth, probing his potential as a positive role model for Kerouac. Snyder provides the model for Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums* who is, according to Timothy Gray, a “Kerouac hero in the tradition of Dean Moriarty.”¹⁹⁷ John Tytell also contrasts the characterisations of Cassady and Snyder in his account of the Beat Generation:

Jaffy Ryder (in real life Gary Snyder) is a fulfilled version of Dean Moriarty: both are remarkably energetic; both are irresistible to women; both are close to the working class in origin and attitude. But Ryder’s energy is directed by a sense of purpose that Dean’s speeded lust for change cannot contain. Although they dress similarly ... and even though they both manifest for Kerouac a similar hope and optimism, Ryder is always constructive while Moriarty is destructive, Ryder creates harmony in his environment while Moriarty thrives on chaos. ... Dean, working on railroads or driving a car, is a projection of the rootless distemper of industrial America, Ryder, a wanderer among mountaintops, suggests a forecast of a post-industrial America ... Ryder is an avatar of a change in consciousness whose impact on American life would only be realised in the sixties.¹⁹⁸

Whilst some of these similarities (such as clothing for example) may seem superficial, they highlight an important difference between Moriarty and Ryder; in the company of Japhy Ryder, Kerouac’s narrator attempts to replace the frantic, aimless movement of *On the Road* with a quest structured around specific goals, such as climbing the imposing Matterhorn mountain. Commenting on this change, Dan McLeod argues that

Snyder’s life and values offered a constructive, albeit underground, alternative to mainstream American culture ... Snyder’s main impact on the Beat Generation, and on American literature since, has been as a spokesperson for the natural world and the values associated with primitive cultures. But his poetic use of Asian sources has also been influential.¹⁹⁹

This chapter will develop McLeod’s argument, and consider Snyder not only as a “Kerouac hero”, but also as a positive role model for Kerouac, who offered the examples

¹⁹⁶ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (1957; repr., New York: New Directions, 1969), 5.

¹⁹⁷ Gray, 2006, 156.

¹⁹⁸ John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 170-1.

¹⁹⁹ Dan McLeod, “Gary Snyder,” in *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America, Part 2*, vol. 16 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Ann Charters (Detroit: Gale, 1983), 487-8.

of Chinese, Japanese and so-called “primitive” cultures as a potential alternative to mainstream American commercial capitalism. Discussing Snyder’s poetry, Rod Phillips tells us that it

has almost always shunned the long expansive line prevalent in so much Beat writing, exemplified by Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” Gregory Corso’s “Marriage,” or the free-flowing, jazz-inspired sentences of Jack Kerouac’s prose. Instead, Snyder’s poetic lines more often run short and are tightly controlled, reminiscent of the haiku and other far eastern forms.²⁰⁰

Phillips also comments that when writing about his experiences with Snyder, “Kerouac signals a change from the souped-up automobile to the simple backpack, a sharp turn off the road and onto the mountain hiking trail.”²⁰¹ The connection between these two statements will be interrogated by considering how Snyder’s use of far-eastern poetic forms and knowledge of so-called “primitive” cultures encouraged his liberation from the mainstream consumer culture driven by cycles of creative destruction.

Kerouac’s brief emulation of Snyder will be explored in the next chapter which examines *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*. This chapter however, will look directly at Snyder and his own work and explore how his resistance to American capitalism resulted in his characterisation as the “fulfilled Moriarty”.

Denouncing overconsumption.

In his “Technical Notes & Queries To Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries”, Snyder forcefully attacks the habit of overconsumption prevalent in twentieth-century Western civilization:

The “free world” has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled ... The conditions of the Cold War have turned all modern societies – Communist included – into vicious distorters of man’s true potential. They create populations of “preta” – hungry ghosts, with giant appetites and throats no bigger than needles²⁰².

²⁰⁰ Rod Phillips, “*Forest Beatniks*” and “*Urban Thoreaus*”: Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Lew Welch, and Michael McClure (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 30.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 53.

²⁰² Snyder, 1969, 91.

A rejection of overconsumption runs through Snyder's oeuvre. The essay "Four Changes" advises readers how to avoid overconsumption, thus avoiding the symptomatic "chronic itch" that plagued Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*:

Boycott bulky wasteful Sunday papers, which use up trees. It's all advertising anyway, which is artificially inducing more energy consumption. ... To grossly use more than you need, to destroy, is biologically unsound. Much of the production and consumption of modern societies is not necessary or conducive to spiritual and cultural growth, let alone survival, and is behind much greed and envy, age-old causes of social and international discord. ... it must be demonstrated ceaselessly that a continually "growing economy" is no longer healthy, but a cancer ... The power of renunciation: if enough Americans refused to buy a new car for one given year, it would permanently alter the American economy.²⁰³

Elsewhere, in the essay "Energy Is Eternal Delight", Snyder provides his readers with an equally stark warning:

For several centuries western civilization has had a priapic drive for material accumulation, continual extensions of political and economic power, termed "progress."... Fed by fossil fuel, this religio-economic view has become a cancer: uncontrollable growth. It may finally choke itself and drag much else down with it.²⁰⁴

Scathing critiques of Western consumer culture are also at the forefront of Snyder's poetry, in which he probes the American obsession with purchase and consumption. "Oil", taken from *The Back Country* is a good example of this. In the final stanza, Snyder condemns material dependence as he describes a ship

bearing what all these
crazed, hooked nations need:
steel plates and
long injections of pure oil.²⁰⁵

Timothy Gray explores this poem in his study of Snyder:

"Oil" takes another look at American consumer dependencies and places them in the context of global trade flows ... Snyder suggests in "Oil" that dangerous exploitation of these resources might be avoided

²⁰³ Snyder, 1995, 37-40.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 53.

²⁰⁵ Snyder, 1971, 20.

if customers would see their dependencies for what they really are:
modern conveniences that are not really all that necessary.²⁰⁶

Here, the American nation is personified as a desperate oil addict. Charles Molesworth also comments on this use of personification and anthropomorphising:

The anthropomorphizing of the ship represents Snyder's only way to give power a sufficiently vivid figuration, and the explicit image of addiction (or at least medical care) in the last lines of the poem manages to faintly humanize and yet harshly criticize the system of industrial growth and "technological drivenness." The men who tend the system have little hope for escape and surcease, since even as they sleep the ship "quivers and slightly twists and always goes."²⁰⁷

This technique is used to a similar effect elsewhere in Snyder's work. Consider an early poem taken from *Riprap*:

THE SAPPAL CREEK

Old rusty-belly thing will soon be gone
Scrap and busted while we're still on earth –
But here you cry for care,
We paint your steel shelves red
& store the big brass valves with green
Wheel handles. Dustpan and wastecan
Nestle in the corner –
Contemplating what to throw away.
Rags in bales, the final home for bathrobes,
Little boy bluejeans and housewife dresses
Gay print splash – all wiping oil off floorplates,
Dangling from hip pockets like a scalp.
Chipping paint, packing valves, going nuts,
Eating frozen meat we wander greasy nurses
Tending sick and nervous old & cranky ship.²⁰⁸

Molesworth points out that the men who tend the system in "Oil" have "little hope for escape and surcease". The reader finds the inhabitants of "The Sappa Creek" in the same predicament. They "wander", a verb here implying activity void of thought as they tend to the system, which is embodied by a ship. Their existence is based on a rapid series of actions, each intended to work toward the maintenance of the system, ending in "going nuts". Snyder underlines what he perceives to be the futility of such exhausting work in

²⁰⁶ Gray, 2006, 181-2.

²⁰⁷ Charles Molesworth, *Gary Snyder's Vision: Poetry and the Real Work* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 54.

²⁰⁸ Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1958; repr., Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2004), 26.

the opening two lines: “Old rusty-belly thing will soon be gone/ Scrap and busted while we’re still on earth –”. To devote so much time and energy to something that will break down and fall apart – becoming “Scrap and busted” – so soon seems extremely frustrating, but the poet implies that workers in Sappa Creek have little choice; despite the knowledge revealed in the first line, they must continually answer the “cry” of the demanding system. Personification is also used to give emotional purchase to the “Rags in bales” that are used to clean the ship. Rather than a mass of indistinguishable material, these take on the character of their former owners so that the reader sees a “Little boy” and a “housewife” “all wiping oil off floorplates”. By setting these raggedy characters to work amongst the oil and grime the poet implicates every consumer in the environmental chaos that results from a culture obsessed with material consumption, not just those working directly in the bowels of factories and ships. He also draws attention to a consumer culture driven by creative destruction, which throws things away with alarming regularity, turning a “Gay print splash” into rubbish. This point is magnified by the presence of the waste receptacles, also personified. They “Nestle in the corner - / Contemplating what to throw away”, symbolising the wasteful attitude adopted by those participating in the consumer culture, a system which advertises countless unnecessary products to its consumers, enticing them into an unending series of purchases.

Snyder also draws the reader’s attention to the problematic side-effects of obsessive overconsumption, such as an increasing loss of connection with nature. The mention of the frozen meat in the penultimate line demonstrates how far a dependence on modern technology and an obsession with purchase and consumption have driven Americans away from nature. Many of Snyder’s poems reflect on the value of hunting and on the sacred bond that he believes is forged between man and animal when the animal is killed in a genuine search for food. An entire section of *Myths and Texts* is, after all dedicated to this relationship between hunter and prey, and individual poems such as “How To Make Stew In The Pinacate Desert” (from *The Back Country*) demonstrate to readers the value Snyder places on sustainable use of nutrients taken from the natural world. “The Sappa Creek”, however, portrays a world that fails to connect with or respect nature in any way. The meat in this poem retains no connection to the animal it was part of. It is portioned, packaged, commoditised and shipped off in unidentifiable slabs. This is a point that Snyder makes on several occasions. In *The Practice of the Wild*, for example, he comments that

in their practice of killing and eating with gentleness and thanks, the primary peoples are our teachers: the attitude toward animals, and their treatment, in twentieth century American industrial meat production is literally sickening, unethical, and a source of boundless bad luck for this society.²⁰⁹

Another problematic symptom of obsessive materialist consumption in corporate liberal America is the erasure of preindustrial cultures, which Snyder alludes to briefly in this poem and writes about at great length elsewhere. Readers already aware of Snyder's oeuvre will not find it difficult to read a lament for Amerindian cultures in the image of rag "Dangling from hip pockets like a scalp". His prose work *A Place in Space* discusses the plight of groups such as the Mojave Indians of the lower Colorado River²¹⁰ and considers what is lost in the wider community when cultures are caught up in "an unparalleled waterfall of destruction of the diversity of human cultures."²¹¹ David Robbins explains that Snyder benefitted greatly from his immersion in cultures outside the grasp of Western consumerism, using these cultural alternatives to distance himself from American corporate liberal culture:

Snyder cultivated a working distance from Western assumptions, chiefly through a personal and scholarly immersion in Eastern cultures that was disciplined by seven years at a Rinzai Zen²¹² monastery in Kyoto, Japan.²¹³

In his review of *Earth House Hold* and *Regarding Wave*, Thomas Parkinson also elaborates on Snyder's use of "primitive" or "other" cultures as a means of escape from the muddled waters of late capitalist Western civilization. He also highlights an important problem that can result from a desire to return to the "primitive":

Insofar as [Snyder's] poetry involves struggle and tension – and it does so very infrequently – it is the struggle to create a mind purified of the lusts and greeds of history. This restoration of the primitive being would permit the inclusion of ritual that gives ratio to the ecstatic, the passionate, the physical. This is its positive direction, but in prose and verse it is frequently defined as *non*: non-Western, non-Christian, non-white, non-capitalist, non-national, non-military, non-

²⁰⁹ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1990), 22.

²¹⁰ Snyder, 1995, 99.

²¹¹ Ibid., 128.

²¹² The Rinzai School is one of the three sects of Zen in Japanese Buddhism. Rinzai Zen places particular emphasis on *kensho* (or "seeing one's true nature") as a gateway to true Buddhist practice. It insists on many years of training which involve *zazen* (seated meditation), *koān* (statements used to provoke "the great doubt") and *samu* (physical work done with mindfulness).

²¹³ David Robbins, "Gary Snyder: The Poet as Informant," *Dialectical Anthropology* 11, no.2 (1986), 203.

civilization. When the facility of negative definition is followed, these negations become prejudices growing from justified revulsion against the abominations of immediate life that can rightly be laid at the door of militarism, unbridled capitalist exploiting, debased Christianity and white chauvinism.²¹⁴

Chapter Two explored Kerouac's own (sometimes heavy-handed) attempts to connect with cultures considered "primitive" or "fellahin". It is important to note that Snyder's work has also attracted criticism for these reasons. Timothy Gray points out that

the response to Snyder's primitivist political program was overwhelmingly positive in San Francisco, but in the background of such celebrations there lurked dissonant voices, many of them exuding from the American Indian community, complaining about the extent to which he and other West Coast bohemians were appropriating native cultures for their own benefit.²¹⁵

Gray responds to this criticism by arguing that although many of Snyder's contemporaries did not achieve a full understanding of the cultures they were mimicking, Snyder himself was motivated by positive political intentions and was equipped with a good level of knowledge about the cultures he studied. Most importantly, Gray says Snyder's "writings from the late 1960s indicate that he was more interested in the political possibilities of the tribal movement than he was with facile modes of escapism."²¹⁶ Discussing some of the essays included in *Earth House Hold*,

²¹⁴ Thomas Parkinson, "Theory and Practice of Gary Snyder," *Journal of Modern Literature* 2, no.3 (1971/1972): 449.

²¹⁵ Gray, 217.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 235. Throughout his career, Snyder's dialogue with "primitive" cultures has certainly been more sophisticated than Kerouac's often stereotyping return to the "fellahin" was. However, as Parkinson indicates, Snyder's success does not mean that his cultural venture was entirely unproblematic. At times the use of "primitive" groups as examples for a cultural alternative simultaneously reinforced prevailing stereotypes, as Franca Bellarsi points out in her discussion of Beat Buddhism: "the Beat's oppositional practice of Buddhism did not sufficiently challenge the fundamental 'otherness' attributed by the American mainstream to this Eastern religion. By 'othering' Buddhism to assert their marginality in the midst of their own society, the Beats reinforced one of the prevailing stereotypes held in the West about the Buddha's legacy" (Franca Bellarsi, "Anticipating the Spiritual Legacy of the Sixties: 'Beatness' and 'Beat Buddhism'" in *In and Around the Sixties*, ed. Mirella Billi and Nicholas Brownlees (Viterbo: Sette Città, 2003), 28-9. When "othering" cultures in this way (as in "Why Tribe" from *Earth House Hold*, in which he discusses the "the Great Subculture"), Snyder also risks reducing "primitive" cultures to symbols representing all that capitalism, Christianity and white chauvinism (to quote Parkinson) had sought to suppress. The problems surrounding these cultural and literary ventures are described at length by the Cherokee-Quapaw-Chickasaw writer Geary Hobson, in his essay "The rise of the white shaman as a new version of cultural imperialism." Describing attempts made by Anglo writers to create Amerindian style literature, Hobson argues that "the shaman-singing of these poets becomes the cries of the culturally crippled...such effort to become new personae, replete with new racial or cultural backgrounds, not only cheapens the cultures which these true believers seek to join, but cheapens as well the culture from which they are fleeing" (Geary Hobson, "The rise of the white shaman as a new version of cultural imperialism," in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Geary Hobson

Gray comments that “each of these 1967 essays contains serious discussion about how the counterculture can look back into history to recover the value system of ancient mystics and primitives”²¹⁷. Preindustrial societies have long provided inspiration for the American artistic avant-garde²¹⁸, as Daniel Belgrad explains:

During World War II, the avant-garde’s disillusionment with America’s dominant culture led them to search for new artistic forms embodying different social values. In this search, they relied on art from societies outside the scope of “Western civilization” as a model and resource. The culture of spontaneity during the 1940s was characterized by forms and subject matter referring to myths and arts

[Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979], 107). It is Hobson’s belief that the rise of that white shaman figure began with Snyder’s *Myths and Texts* “in which the poet speaks through the persona of an Indian shaman” (Hobson, 105). However, he also believes that Snyder made a sincere and genuine effort to “incorporate an essential part of American Indian philosophy into his work” (Hobson, 105). According to Hobson, the main problem with Snyder’s writing is that it spawned so many “bastard children” (Hobson, 105) who created poor imitations of Snyder’s work without taking the time to understand the relevant philosophy. The popularity of Snyder’s work in this field creates another problem, which Hobson outlines: “since the American public has already become accustomed to ...the poetry of “white shamans” such as Gary Snyder...contemporary Indian writers are often discounted or ignored since they are not following or conforming to the molds created by these ‘experts’” (Hobson, 103). Hopi-Miwok anthropologist and writer, Wendy Rose supports Hobson’s argument. In her essay “The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshamanism”, Rose is highly critical of writing by “white shamans” such as Charles Olson, Michael McClure and Snyder, arguing that “the proliferation of [white shaman writing] typically occurs to the exclusion of far more accurate and/or genuinely native material” (Wendy Rose, “The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshamanism,” in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes [Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992], 404). Whilst Snyder may write with an informed attitude and the best of intentions, there remain problems associated with his cultural project which should not be ignored.

²¹⁷ Gray, 216.

²¹⁸ As well as the sensitive issues surrounding cultural appropriation, there are more general problems associated with a desire to reconnect with the “primitive”. Once such problem lies is the exploitation of “primitive” imagery for economic gain, which Timothy Gray discusses in his exploration of San Francisco hippie culture in the mid-twentieth century: “The hippie invocation of tribal cultures was made easy in an urban marketplace that catered to the production and consumption of primitive artifacts, which more often than not were just cheap simulacra...Suddenly, primitive values no longer existed somewhere “out there,” but had become through exploitative business practices consumable accessories purchases by bohemian types who wanted to announce that they were far-out...Amidst its inventory of acidhead wares, the Psychedelic Shop, a bastion of “hip capitalism” located on Haight Street, displayed Indian paisley prints, brass bells, and bamboo flutes alongside a variety of dope pipes” (Gray, 230). Whilst Snyder may have advocated a return to “primitive” cultures as an antidote to frantic cycles of capitalist consumption, it was clearly not long before these cultures were also co-opted into the marketplace.

An additional problem arises when one considers the place of women in some of Snyder’s poetry. It could be argued that several “primitive” cultures are as guilty of the patriarchal displacement of female power as capitalist America is. For example, in his study of Snyder Timothy Gray notes that “the Japanese society that ...bohemian expatriates found so attractive on so many levels was restrictive when it came to gender relations” (Gray, 241). One particular problem of this kind that appears in Snyder’s poetry is his tendency to reduce women to symbolic representations of “primitive” cultures. Consider, for example, “For a Far-Out Friend” taken from *Riprap*, in which Snyder says of his female companion, “I saw you as a Hindu Deva-girl/ Light legs dancing in the waves...I found you again, gone stone,/ in Zimmer’s book of Indian Art” (Snyder, 2004, 13). Whilst Snyder’s tone in this poem may be deferential, he transforms his companion from an individual into a conduit, through which he might connect with his desired “primitive” cultures. This can make for uncomfortable reading, demonstrating as it does that Snyder is not immune from the patriarchal habits evident in both “primitive” and modern capitalist cultures.

of archaic or tribal civilizations – what were sometimes referred to as “primitive” societies, although then, as now, there was uneasiness about the derogatory implications of that term.²¹⁹

Snyder’s use of the term “primitive” is indeed problematic. However, his use of the contentious term is not intended to be derogatory, controversial though it may be. He uses it to refer to cultures which he believes exist in close harmony with the natural world, and are therefore free from the negative psychological effects of late capitalism and its obsession with overconsumption. This is evident in “Poetry and the Primitive”, where Snyder praises the economies of such societies:

Ecology: “eco” (*oikos*) meaning “house” (cf. “ecumenical”): Housekeeping on Earth. Economics, which is merely the housekeeping of various social orders – taking out more than it puts back – must learn the rules of the greater realm. Ancient and primitive cultures had this knowledge more surely and with almost as much empirical precision ... as the most concerned biologist today.²²⁰

The previous chapter demonstrated that Kerouac’s spontaneous prose reflected mainstream American consumer culture. This chapter will now continue by demonstrating how Snyder’s immersion in these non-Western cultures, particularly those of China and Japan, affected not only his political outlook, but also the form of his poetry.

The influence of the East.

In *Earth House Hold*, Snyder suggests that the best way to escape the confines of American corporate liberal culture is to immerse oneself in alternative cultures that reject the late capitalist patterns of overconsumption and creative destruction. On several occasions, Snyder groups these civilisations together by referring to them as “the Great Subculture”:

This is the tradition that runs without break from Paleo-Siberian Shamanism and Magdalenian²²¹ cave-painting; through the megaliths

²¹⁹ Belgrad, 44.

²²⁰ Snyder, 1969, 127-8.

²²¹ Magdalenian refers to a later culture of the Upper Paleolithic in Western Europe, dating from roughly 17000-11000 years ago.

and Mysteries, astronomers, ritualists, alchemists and Albigensians²²²; gnostics²²³ and vagantes²²⁴, right down to Golden Gate Park²²⁵.

The Great Subculture has been attached in part to the official religions but is different in that it transmits a community style of life, with an ecstatically positive vision of spiritual and physical love; and it is opposed for very fundamental reasons to the Civilization Establishment.²²⁶

In his prose essay, “Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique”, Snyder suggests that poets in particular “must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us - birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.”²²⁷ It is clear that Snyder engaged with many ancient cultures when seeking inspiration for his poetry. *The Back Country* includes poems set in Japan, India and America, as well as translations of Japanese poems into English. This chapter will continue by focusing primarily on Snyder’s engagement with Japanese and Chinese culture, arguing that an early engagement with these cultures helped to shape Snyder’s poetry, enabling the development of a form that reflected his opposition to the culture of capitalist overconsumption.

The eastern influence is clearly discernible in Snyder’s poetry. Consider, for example, “Hitch Haiku”²²⁸ taken from *The Back Country*. The title acknowledges Snyder’s deliberate use of the Japanese form and, although there is no strict recurring syllable pattern, the close resemblance to traditional haiku is clear. The first stanza in particular comes close to replicating the five-seven-five pattern of *on* sound units²²⁹:

They didn’t hire him
so he ate his lunch alone:
the noon whistle

²²² The Albigensians or Albigenses were members of a Christian Catharist sect from Southern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They were exterminated for heresy during the Inquisition.

²²³ Gnosticism is a belief that the material world should be shunned and the spiritual world should be embraced.

²²⁴ *Episcopi vagantes* are people who have been consecrated as Christian Bishops outside of the structure and canon law of the established churches.

²²⁵ Golden Gate Park is a large public park in San Francisco. In 1967 part of the park was the site of the Human Be-In, which amongst other things responded to a new Californian law banning the use of LSD. Speakers at the rally included Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, as well as Snyder. It is thought that somewhere between 20000 and 30000 people were present.

²²⁶ Snyder, 1969, 115.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

²²⁸ Snyder, 1971, 24-7.

²²⁹ “On” (or more rarely, “Onji”) refers to counting phonetic sounds in Japanese poetry. In Japanese, the word “on” means “sound”. It is also used to mean the phonetic units counted in haiku. Whilst the modern Japanese term for this linguistic concept is either *kaku* or *mōra*, English-speaking linguists usually refer to the concept as “morae”.

In “Hitch Haiku”, however, Snyder’s immersion in Japanese culture is reflected not only in the borrowed form, but also in content. The sixth stanza, for example is footnoted by the location: “*Seattle*”. However, it reads:

Old kanji hid by dirt
on skidroad Jap town walls
 down the hill
to the Wobbly hall

Despite explicitly indicating that this section of the poem was written in America, Snyder describes a “Jap” town, walls decorated with old kanji, logographic characters used in the modern Japanese writing system. Similarly, later stanzas refer to “hot saké” and “cherry blossom”, (a commonly recurring symbol in Japanese art and extremely widespread plant in Japan).

Like Snyder, Kerouac composed many haiku. According to the poet himself, Kerouac did not compose haiku in the same way as he produced his spontaneous prose. In a 1967 interview with Ted Berrigan, Kerouac stated that “haiku is best reworked and revised ... It has to be completely economical, no foliage and flowers and language rhythm, it has to be a simple little picture in three little lines. At least that’s the way the old masters did it”²³⁰. Clearly this simple, economical form is a departure from the adorned spontaneous prose which, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, mirrors the patterns of overproduction in late capitalist America. Editor of Kerouac’s *Book of Haikus*, Regina Weinreich explain that “each poem [in the collection] reveals the essence of haiku through simplicity of expression and compression”²³¹, stylistic qualities which would not be attributed to Kerouac’s spontaneous prose. Weinreich also explains that Kerouac became familiar with the sparse Japanese form by reading R.H. Blyth’s four volume series *Haiku*, which included the work of “old masters” Matsuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, and Masaoka Shiki.²³² This immersion in the literature of an alternative, older culture clearly had an important, if limited effect on Kerouac; certainly he was heavily influenced by the Japanese masters when he composed his own haiku. However, their influence did not alter his compositional style when it came to his prose, or even other types of poetry. In the same interview with Berrigan, Kerouac said

²³⁰ Ted Berrigan, “The Art of Fiction: Jack Kerouac,” in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 56.

²³¹ Regina Weinreich in Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, ed. Regina Weinreich (London: Enitharmon Press, 2004), xxx.

²³² *Ibid.*, xxi-xxii.

of his “English” verse that he “knocked it off fast like prose”²³³. Therefore, whilst his haiku may have resembled the economical phrasing of the Japanese poets, Kerouac’s writing outside of the haiku retained its expansive form. Additionally, like Snyder, Kerouac also Americanized the haiku, but was explicit about doing so. In *Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac named his American haiku “pops”, offering the following definition:

POP ----- American (non-Japanese) Haikus, short 3-line poems or “pomes” rhyming or non-rhyming delineating “little Samadhis” if possible, usually of a Buddhist connotation, aimed towards enlightenment.”²³⁴

Weinreich describes these pops as “well attuned to both [Japanese and American culture], a fusion of traditional haiku and Western bluesy tones.”²³⁵ The following haiku is a good example of this, as it fits an image of mid-twentieth century capitalist America into a much older Japanese form:

2 traveling salesmen
passing each other
On a Western road²³⁶

In their Americanized haiku, Kerouac and Snyder use Japanese poetry to shape their American landscape. Snyder in particular introduces talismans of a more “ancient” culture just as he introduces east-Asian elements into his poetic style. However, there is a problematic side to this cultural borrowing. In tailoring Japanese form and content to fit the Seattle landscape, Snyder appropriates and Americanizes the haiku. In *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim*, Timothy Gray discusses this problem of cultural appropriation. Gray suggests that that whilst “hippie Orientalists” of Snyder’s generation sometimes advanced a thoughtful understanding of Amerindian and Asian cultures, they also allowed Americans “to co-opt exotic cultural ceremonies for their personal benefit, their own sense of freedom or liberation from mainstream culture.”²³⁷ Indeed, whilst Snyder’s use of Japanese poetry might provide a new, beneficial way of viewing American society, “Hitch Haiku” does little to advance an understanding of Japanese culture, homage though it may be. Many examples of this stylistic appropriation can be

²³³ Berrigan, 56.

²³⁴ Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 342. Samādhi is a higher level of concentrated meditation.

²³⁵ Weinreich in Kerouac, 2004, xxiv.

²³⁶ Ibid., 6.

²³⁷ Gray, 221.

found in Snyder's poetry, as Patrick Murphy explains when he outlines some of the east-Asian poetic forms borrowed by the poet:

Chinese ... expresses poetic images in blocks and concise phrases, often without verbs and with no equivalents of English language prepositions and articles. ... Likewise, the Japanese language has a very different syntax and grammar than English. ... Neither language can have the kind of metrical verse that dominated English-language poetry into the twentieth century. Snyder eschews metrics, and in his poems the frequent absence of articles stands out. He often uses infinitives and participles, *to go* and *going* rather than subject + verb constructions in his poems, so that actions occur by no "I" claims control. The poems of *Riprap* are replete with such practices, reflecting Asian poetic influences.²³⁸

Riprap's opening poem, "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" provides a strong example of Snyder's borrowing. The form of the poem is extremely economical, reflecting the influence of east-Asian poetry:

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.²³⁹

Jody Norton writes that "the first strophe is very reminiscent of shih poetry":

No speaker is posited: we are presented with a handful of selected objects within a roughly sketched climatic and geographic environment. ... How akin the line of this section is to the five-character shih line ... may be seen by comparing four lines of Han Shan's shih, translated by Snyder as "#8" in *Cold Mountain Poems*²⁴⁰

Just as Murphy suggests of Snyder's work, the poem presents a series of isolated images, often without verbs, as in the first two lines "Down valley a smoke haze" and "Three

²³⁸ Patrick D. Murphy, *Understanding Gary Snyder* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 16-17.

²³⁹ Snyder, 2004, 3.

²⁴⁰ Jody Norton, "The Importance of Nothing: Absence and Its Origins in the Poetry of Gary Snyder," *Contemporary Literature* 28, no.1 (Spring, 1987), 63.

days heat, after five days rain". In the first stanza, "glows" is the only verb, and when action occurs in the second stanza, the poet favours present participles (for example "drinking" and "looking") rather than subject + verb constructions, as is the case in east-Asian forms. Similarly, adjectives are few, particularly in the first stanza where, aside from numerical distinctions, there is only "new". As Murphy explains, Snyder has chosen to eschew metrics in this instance, and rather than cementing identity, the only "I" in the poem expresses a sense of forgetfulness and perhaps even a loss of identity, given the absent friends and forgotten knowledge. However, it is the "concise" and economical phrasing described by Murphy, that allows Snyder to distance himself from the culture of overconsumption reflected in Kerouac's heavily descriptive prose. In his "Afterword" to the collection *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Snyder explicitly outlines the extent to which he was influenced by the economical style of Chinese poetry:

There is no doubt that my readings of Chinese poems, with their monosyllabic step-by-step placement, their crispness – and the clatter of mule hooves – all fed this style. ... The idea of a poetry of minimal surface texture, with its complexities hidden at the bottom of the pool, under the bank, a dark old lurking, no fancy flavor, is ancient ... Zen says, "Unformed people delight in the gaudy, and in novelty. Cooked people delight in the ordinary."²⁴¹

Although it would be over-hasty to suggest that Snyder was calling Kerouac "gaudy" or "unformed" the gap between the two writers' stylistic manifestos is vast. Whilst Snyder favours an economical "poetry of minimal surface texture", Kerouac advocates "the infantile pileup of scatalogical buildup words"²⁴² that, amongst other things, reflects the overproduction and overconsumption that characterised mainstream American culture at the time. In contrast, Snyder forms a sparse poetry that reflects his concerns with the economical management of resources, and registers his opposition to a culture driven by creative destruction²⁴³. In part, this opposition is demonstrated by his valorisation of

²⁴¹ Snyder, 2004, 66-7.

²⁴² Kerouac, 1994(a), 69.

²⁴³ However, Snyder's relatively sparse form is still part of and subject to the political economy that Kerouac replicates when his prose reproduces the patterns of consumption and production that are generated by an economy shaped by creative destruction. In his essays for sustainable, environmentally positive living, Snyder does not advocate a *complete* desertion of modern civilization, but instead encourages moderation and environmental awareness. Rather than suggesting an unrealistic abandonment of all cars, for example, Snyder advocates car-pooling and hitch-hiking (Snyder, 1995, 36). This moderate approach meant that Snyder was still entangled with the late capitalist economy, although in a more critical and wary way than most of his contemporaries. Similarly, Snyder's sparse, economical form still reflects the political economy that Kerouac mirrored in his prose, although it replicates a very different

societies and cultures deemed to be “ancient” and therefore not psychologically polluted by the corporate liberal obsession with constant accumulation. However, Snyder’s desire to return completely to the old ways is not necessarily a realistic aspiration. Given the cultural obliteration that has already taken place it may not even be possible to fully understand the ancient cultures Snyder admires. Indeed, in “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution”, Snyder himself seems to abandon the original ancient cultures as lost:

The traditional cultures are in any case doomed, and rather than cling to their good aspects hopelessly it should be remembered that whatever is or ever was in any other culture can be reconstructed from the unconscious, through meditation.²⁴⁴

This statement is uncomfortably appropriative. Snyder seems to be suggesting that as long as modern societies can harness the values of the ancient cultures, their obliteration is irrelevant and should not be mourned. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that (despite his years of anthropological study) Snyder is still looking at the ancient cultures through a post-industrial American lens, which Patrick Murphy points out when he comments that Snyder’s “excessively optimistic perception of the possibility of swift cultural change is very American”²⁴⁵. Nonetheless, Snyder’s perhaps naive belief in the restorative value of ancient cultures is unwavering. This belief is reflected simultaneously in his politics and his poetics, and he creates an ecologically and politically motivated poetry that expresses his utopian aims through both content and economical form.

The economical sparseness found in Snyder’s poetry is also present in his translations from Chinese. Jacob Leed provides an illuminating article that discusses Snyder’s methods when translating the “Cold Mountain” poems. Leed focuses in particular on Snyder’s ability to “render each five-character line of [poem #8] in just five English words”²⁴⁶, intent on maintaining the simplicity and clarity of the Chinese originals. Whilst Snyder is determined to capture the original clarity of the Chinese style, he is sometimes willing to update the content of the Cold Mountain poems, as in “Poem #2”:

aspect of economics: whilst Kerouac’s adjectivally heavy prose replicates patterns of overproduction, Snyder’s frugal poetry replicates his own economic approach, which encourages careful management of resources and using exactly what one needs to.

²⁴⁴ Snyder, 1969, 92-3.

²⁴⁵ Patrick Murphy, *A Place for Wayfaring: The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000), 93.

²⁴⁶ Jacob Leed, “Gary Snyder, Han Shan, and Jack Kerouac,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 11, no.1 (March 1984), 186.

In a tangle of cliffs I chose a place –
 Bird-paths, but no trails for men.
 What's beyond the yard?
 White clouds clinging to vague rocks.
 Now I've lived here – how many years –
 Again and again, spring and winter pass.
 Go tell families with silverware and cars
 "What's the use of all that noise and money?"²⁴⁷

Whilst retaining the pared down language of the original, Snyder also co-opts Han Shan's poetry to voice his own complaint against modern consumer culture, attacking the automobile, symbolic of mainstream American capitalist culture in the middle of the twentieth century. In using this translation to attack the consumer culture, Snyder demonstrates how learning from more "ancient" or "primitive" forms can help poets express their discontent with modern society. However, whilst the simple, sparse lines of Han-shan's poetry provide Snyder with a stylistic antidote to the mainstream culture characterised by overconsumption, his easy Americanization of Chinese art remains problematic.

Snyder's belief in the value of east-Asian literature is also apparent in "Lookout's Journal", which opens *Earth House Hold*. Roy Teele claims that "the poetic travel diary, which in the hands of Bashō²⁴⁸ became a genre in its own right" is strikingly Japanese in style. Take, for example, his entry for 9 July, written at Granite Creek Guard Station:

the boulder in the creek never moves
 the water is always falling
 together!

A ramshackle little cabin built by Frank Beebe the miner.
 Two days walk to here from roadhead.
 arts of the Japanese: moon-watching
 insect-hearing²⁴⁹

Whilst the first section of this quote does not follow the five-seven-five syllabic pattern common to many haiku, it maintains the essence of "cutting", or *kiru*, that is traditional to the form: two ideas, here the unmoveable boulder and the falling water are juxtaposed

²⁴⁷ Snyder, 2004, 40.

²⁴⁸ Matsuo Bashō was perhaps the most famous poet of the Edo Period (1603-1868) in Japan. In 1793 Bashō was deified by the Shinto bureaucracy.

²⁴⁹ Snyder, 1969, 2.

by the “cutting word”, or *kireji* which explains to readers how the two elements are related and in this instance is “together!”. Once again, the deliberate reference to Japanese culture in the second section indicates to the reader that Snyder is consciously trying to adopt an alternative cultural outlook which, through its simplicity and deliberately minimalistic clarity, might withstand the psychological battering that Snyder perceived to be part of mainstream American capitalist culture driven by overconsumption. However, when Snyder does specifically describe overconsumption and the other side-effects of consumer culture in the middle of the twentieth century, the form of his writing often alters, moving away from the economical sparseness of east-Asian poetry. Take, for example, this small section from “Japan First Time Around”:

- dreamed of a new industrial-age dark ages: filthy narrow streets and
dirty buildings with rickety walks over the streets from building to
building – unwashed illiterate brutal cops – a motorcycle cop and
sidecar drove up and over a fat workingman who got knocked down in
a fight – tin cans and garbage and drooping electric wires everywhere
- ²⁵⁰

In comparison with “Lookout’s Journal”, the prose piece is cluttered with adjectives, accumulating like the garbage in the final line, just as they do in the opening lines of “T – 2 Tanker Blues”, which describes a similar dissatisfaction with the poet’s industrial surroundings:

Mind swarming with pictures, cheap magazines, drunk brawls, low
books and days at sea; hatred of machinery and money & whoring my
hands and back to move this military oil – ²⁵¹

When not immersed in a world dominated by “machinery and money” Snyder’s usual economical brevity reflects the influence of east-Asian poetics, it is not only a nostalgic reflection of past cultures. It also provides Snyder with an appropriate form through which to challenge the mainstream reaction to overconsumption. Instead of replicating patterns of overconsumption, Snyder’s poetic form reflects an economic approach that encourages careful resource management and condemns waste. On some few occasions, Snyder’s style does reflect the clutter of consumer driven America, but most frequently he presents to his readers economical, unadorned poetry that suggests alternative

²⁵⁰ Snyder, 1969, 35.

²⁵¹ Snyder, 2004, 29.

methods of existing within the late capitalist American economy²⁵². Sherman Paul surmises this economical form in his discussion of “Lookout’s Journal” which, as has already been noted, clearly reflects the influence of economical east-Asian poetics:

The journals are the work of a Zenist and a poet, a poet who has learned much about form from Pound but more, I think, from Chinese and Japanese poetry. ... The principle of form applies to the journal as a whole and to many of the poems. Snyder observes in this journal that form is “leaving things out at the right spot/ ellipse, is emptiness.” This emptiness is not empty; it is the ultimate, the fullness of life of which a few carefully selected and carefully placed things may make us aware.²⁵³

Snyder’s debt to Ezra Pound should not be overlooked. Snyder himself also acknowledges the influence, for example when he praises *The New American Poetry Anthology* in *A Place in Space*, claiming that “this poetry is the ‘modern’ tradition – harking back to Ezra Pound”²⁵⁴. Like the Chinese and Japanese poets, Pound was an advocate of economical phrasing, suggesting that one should avoid all unnecessary adornments, particularly adjectival ones²⁵⁵. For example, in his instructive essay “A Retrospect”, Pound commands, “don’t be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it.”²⁵⁶ Elsewhere in the essay, Pound commands “use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. ... Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something.”²⁵⁷ In the middle of the twentieth-century America, this fiscal approach to writing serves as an excellent alternative to a culture dominated by an obsession with spending and consuming, and with constant material accumulation. In maintaining an unadorned poetic style, Snyder brings together the form and the content of his work, creating a poetry that denounces overconsumption on an ecological basis, as Norton explains:

²⁵² As stated previously however, Snyder’s approach does not amount to a complete removal from this political economy. Rather, it suggests an alternative way of managing life on the periphery of late capitalism.

²⁵³ Sherman Paul, “Lookout to Ashram: The Way of Gary Snyder, Part 1,” *The Iowa Review* 1, no.3 (Summer 1970), 81-83.

²⁵⁴ Snyder, 1995, 15.

²⁵⁵ However, whilst Pound may advocate economic styles such as Snyder’s, in their entirety his cantos could, in contrast be interpreted as a staggering example of accumulation, which is more apparent in Kerouac’s prose.

²⁵⁶ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essay of Ezra Pound*, 3rd ed., ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1935), 6.

²⁵⁷ Pound, 3-4.

Snyder's poetry incorporates ... numerous elements of the poetics and stylistic procedures of the shih poetry of T'ang Dynasty China and the Japanese haiku. Snyder combines these assumptions and practices with his own experience, imagination, and voice to compose a characteristic elliptical mode, whose aim is to make form not an extension, but an expression, of content.²⁵⁸

Snyder has often praised the benefits of an understanding of east-Asian culture. Talking specifically about Chinese-to-English translations, he says

when English-speaking readers first came onto Chinese poetry in translation, about sixty years ago, there was a sigh of relief. It was refreshing to get away from romanticism and symbolism and to step into the cool world of Chinese lyric poetry. ... Chinese poetry in translation helped us find a way toward a clear secular poetic statement²⁵⁹.

Through his valorisation of ancient cultures, Snyder creates a poetic form which he offers as a response to the late capitalist obsession with material accumulation. However, his optimistic quest to inherit wisdom from cultures he calls "primitive" also places him in opposition to Fisher's theory of an America dedicated to constant cycles of cultural creative destruction. Rather than promoting a culture of "creative destruction, and an ever shifting census of persons, things, and ways of life"²⁶⁰, Snyder suggests that we immerse ourselves in the old ways, using them as an evaluative lens through which to view modern corporate liberal America. Indeed, Snyder explicitly outlines his discomfort with the phrase "New World" as a name for America, explaining that (contrary to Fisher's argument) America is endowed with a long cultural history, although in more recent years the onslaught of industrialization and the vast expansion of capitalism has put it under threat:

That new world proves to be its own kind of fiction. I am not talking about the fictions of idealized democracy as set against the disappointments of the twentieth century. There is something far more fundamental at stake. For the actual locus of the American "new world" is not new but is an ancient continent, hundreds of millions of years old. At the time of Columbus's voyage, the Western Hemisphere already had something like sixty million lively, totally competent, well-settled inhabitants.²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ Norton, 43.

²⁵⁹ Snyder, 1995, 86.

²⁶⁰ Fisher, 27.

²⁶¹ Snyder, 1995, 214.

In welcoming the influence of “ancient” cultures into his work, Snyder protests against this erasure of civilizations and against the obsession with modernity and novelty. The result of his immersion in east-Asian culture is that the form of his poetry matches the political content; it resists the habits of a consumer driven society addicted to overconsumption and material gain, habits that one can see reflected in Kerouac’s prose. The next chapter will look again at Kerouac’s prose, considering the attempt he made to follow Snyder’s instruction and example, and what happened when he failed to do so. Given the sometimes naively optimistic ambition of Snyder’s cultural project however, perhaps it is understandable that Kerouac eventually abandoned his emulation of Snyder.

Chapter Four - “Signposts of something wrong”²⁶²: *Big Sur* and *The Dharma Bums*.

This final chapter will consider Kerouac’s attempts to critically oppose the late capitalist culture of overconsumption, taking into account his relationships with Snyder and Cassady. It will also consider whether or not an exposure to Snyder’s socio-political directives altered the form of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac has his characterisation of Snyder – Japhy Ryder – deliver a harsh appraisal of consumer culture:

see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, the Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least fancy new cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume²⁶³.

This chapter will explore how, despite such diatribes, Kerouac did not completely isolate himself from the mainstream consumer culture. This will be accomplished by examining the fluctuating influences of Snyder and Neal Cassady in *The Duluoz Legend*, and by appraising Kerouac’s engagement with Buddhism. To demonstrate this *Big Sur* (one of the later *Duluoz Legend* novels) will be examined, as well as *The Dharma Bums*, the fictionalised account of Kerouac’s excursions with Snyder.

Following Snyder’s trail.

Writing about *The Dharma Bums* a year after its publication, Freeman Champney saw a new positivity in Kerouac’s work, claiming that his “current attitude is more hopeful and less end-of-the-road nihilistic than it was.”²⁶⁴ However, Kerouac later went on to denounce *The Dharma Bums*. For example, in a 1961 letter to Gary Snyder he stated, “Am now typing up new big novel BIG SUR you will like bettern DBums ...because honest.”²⁶⁵ It is import to remember here that although the *Duluoz Legend* traces the

²⁶² Kerouac, 2006, 36.

²⁶³ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (1959; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2007), 83.

²⁶⁴ Freeman Champney, “Beat-Up or Beatific?” *The Antioch Review* 19, no.1, *The Origin of Species*, 100 *Years Later* (Spring 1959), 119.

²⁶⁵ Kerouac, 1999, 361.

history of the author's life, it is not a strictly autobiographical account. Having understood that Kerouac fictionalised his own life, it is important that readers do not marry Kerouac's biography to his fiction too explicitly, although knowledge of his life can illuminate a study of his work. In a 1963 interview in *Chicago Daily News*, Kerouac described his semi-autobiographical project as "a completely written lifetime...somewhat a la Balzac and Proust. But each section, that is, each novel, has to stand by itself as an individual story with a flavour of its own and a pivot of its own. Nevertheless, they must all fit together on one shelf as a continuous tale."²⁶⁶ Given this model, we might question why Kerouac chooses to "re-write" the passage of time covered by *The Dharma Bums* as he does in *Desolation Angels*, creating a narrative overlap. Michael Hrebeniak explains that, "unlike the work of Balzac or [Thomas] Wolfe, Kerouac's sequence trades linear organization for a more adventurous principle of fictive overlay":

Recurring events are superimposed to build a series of themes and variations neutralizing a single career narrative: a hypertext of many narratives and selves with each book a ratio within the whole.²⁶⁷

Re-writing a section of his fictionalised life in this way allows Kerouac to retract or amend opinions once held. For example, when comparing *The Dharma Bums* to *Desolation Angels*, readers find drastically altered portrayals of isolated meditation. The final two chapters of *The Dharma Bums* describe the time spent by Ray Smith alone on Desolation Peak. They offer the reader a portrait of a perfectly contented man. According to Smith, he awakes on his first morning in "beautiful blue sunshine" and experiences "a tremendous sensation of ... dreamlikeness which never left me all summer".²⁶⁸ However, these images of calm contentment are contradicted by the accounts of time spent on Desolation Ridge in *Desolation Angels*. In the opening section of *Desolation Angels* the narrator constantly craves the comforts and entertainments of the world below the mountain. Frustrated, he writes "but enough!"

enough of rocks and trees and yaloping y-birds! I wanta go where there's lamps and telephones and rumpled couches with women on them, where there're rich thick rugs for toes, where the drama rages all unthinking²⁶⁹.

²⁶⁶ "I Simply Plan a Completely Written Lifetime," in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 44.

²⁶⁷ Hrebeniak, 23.

²⁶⁸ Kerouac, 2007, 196.

²⁶⁹ Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (1960; repr., London: Riverhead Books, 1995[a]), 90.

However in *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith lives by the example of Japhy Ryder, and therefore time spent alone on Desolation Peak is a peaceful, enjoyable experience, rather than a wretchedly lonely period of isolation filled with boredom. Ryder fulfils the role of mentor in this book, as Dean Moriarty did in *On the Road*, and Smith's determination to make Ryder proud is made obvious on his ascent to the solitary cabin:

I could hear Japhy's voice singing gay songs with his guitar as the wind howled around our barge and the gray waves plashed up against the windows of the pilot house.

"And this is Japhy's lake, and these are Japhy's mountains," I thought, and wished Japhy were there to see me doing everything he wanted me to do.²⁷⁰

However, a comparison of passages from *Desolation Angels* and *The Dharma Bums* will reveal the fleeting nature of this optimistic outlook. The two fictional passages that follow deal with the same historical moment: Kerouac's descent from Desolation Peak. However, they express very different sentiments. In this first passage from *The Dharma Bums* Ray gives thanks for his time spent in isolation. Once again, his thoughts return to his friend and mentor, Japhy Ryder:

"Japhy," I said out loud, "I don't know when we'll meet again or what'll happen in the future, but Desolation, Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you for guiding me to the place where I learned all. Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities and I've grown two months older and there's all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love" ... And in keeping with Japhy's habit of always getting down on one knee and delivering a little prayer to the camp we left ... I turned and knelt on the trail and said "Thank you, shack." Then I added "Blah," with a little grin, because I knew that shack and that mountain would understand what that meant, and turned and went on down the trail back to this world.²⁷¹

The passage of happy thanksgiving contrasts starkly with this next, taken from *Desolation Angels*, which deals with exactly the same moment in the author's life, but is seen through the eyes of the disillusioned Jack Duluoz:

Funny how, now the time (in timelessness) has come to leave that hated rock-top trap I have no emotions, instead of making a humble prayer to my sanctuary as I twist it out of sight behind my heaving back all I do is say "Bah – humbug" (knowing the mountain will understand, the void) but where was the joy? – the joy I prophesied, of

²⁷⁰ Kerouac, 2007, 191.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 203-4.

bright new snow rocks, and new strange holy trees and lovely hidden flowers by the down-go happy-o trail?²⁷²

In *Desolation Angels* the place Smith apparently owes so much to is a “hated rock-top trap”. By placing his trip to Desolation Peak at the opening of *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac suggests it is something to escape from, an ordeal to be endured until he can re-enter the society with all the “bars and burlesque shows and gritty love” that Ray Smith seems to fear returning to. Any sense of calm and inner peace is absent in this second extract, in which the narrator describes his “heaving back” as he “twists” in an attempt to block the view of his former prison. The motions describe an agitated traveller eager to escape back to the world below along with all its vices. In *The Dharma Bums*, however, the author’s period on Desolation Peak ends the novel, suggesting that meditative time alone is a goal that Ray Smith has been working towards. Having learned from Japhy’s example, Ray ends the novel ready to embark on his own period of contemplation away from the instruction of his mentor.

This comparison exemplifies the fleeting nature of the dogmatic socio-political criticisms offered by Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums*. However, it is not only comparisons to *Desolation Angels* that demonstrate the problematic nature of Kerouac’s relationship with consumerism and Buddhist practice. For example, *The Dharma Bums* opens by announcing Smith’s disillusionment with his former way of life:

I was very devout in those days and was practising my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I’ve become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral...But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquillity and wisdom and ecstasy.²⁷³

It is hard to forget this regretful preface, and Kerouac ensures his readers remember this loss of optimism, inserting regretful lines throughout the text:

I prayed that God, or Tathagata²⁷⁴, would give me enough time and enough sense and strength to be able to tell people what I knew (as I can’t even do properly now) so they’d know what I know and not despair so much.²⁷⁵

²⁷² Kerouac, 1995(a), 98.

²⁷³ Kerouac, 2007, 8.

²⁷⁴ Tathāgata is a Sanskrit word that the Buddha of the Pali canon uses when referring to himself. The Pali Canon is the standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition (the relatively conservative, oldest surviving branch of Buddhism), as preserved in the Pali language.

²⁷⁵ Kerouac, 2007, 31.

Smith's failure to live like his Buddhist mentor is made apparent in these moments of regret, but his uneasy relationship with consumerism is also evidenced by certain features that appear regularly as part of his prose style throughout the novel. Chapter Two considered how, whilst in the company of Neal Cassady, Kerouac's prose style reflected his proximity to the consumer culture characterised by creative destruction. *The Dharma Bums* demonstrates that despite a change in companion, Kerouac's prose style remains largely the same. Kerouac is far more explicit in his declamation of consumer culture in *The Dharma Bums*. Nonetheless, the reader will still find the piles of adjectives that featured in *On the Road*. Take for example the detailed, descriptive account of Ray Smith reaching the end of his descent from the Matterhorn:

that roaring creek was a beauty by moonlight, those flashes of flying moon water, that snow white foam, those black-as-pitch trees, regular elfin paradises of shadow and moon. The air began to get warmer and nicer and in fact I thought I could begin to smell people again. We could smell the nice raunchy tidesmell of the lake water, and flowers, and softer dust of down below. Everything up there had smelled of ice and snow and heartless spine rock. Here there was the smell of sun-heated wood, sunny dust resting in the moonlight, lake mud, flowers, straw, and all those good things on earth.²⁷⁶

There is a rich array of sensory detail in this passage.²⁷⁷ As in *On the Road* he does not pause and choose just one word or phrase. Instead, Kerouac yokes words (for example, "tidesmell") and images together; the rushing water of the creek is both "flying moon water" and "snow white foam". By adorning his narrative with a plethora of adjectives, Kerouac recreates every possible detail of the landscape he encounters, creating what he described as "Bookmovie ... the movie in words, the visual American form"²⁷⁸. Although the content of his work changed under Snyder's influence, Kerouac's prose still contains the features that characterised his writing about Dean Moriarty and the road. For example, Kerouac's description of Skagit River contains more examples of the compounds explored in Chapter Two:

²⁷⁶ Kerouac, 2007, 78.

²⁷⁷ It must be noted however, that this immense amount of detail draws attention to the naturally formed "good things on earth" rather than the products of a consumer society driven by creative destruction.

²⁷⁸ Kerouac, 1994(a), 73.

it was a river wonderland, the emptiness of the golden eternity²⁷⁹, odors of moss and bark and twigs and mud, all ululating mysterious *visionstuff* before my eyes, tranquil and everlasting nevertheless, the *hillhairing* trees, the dancing sunlight ... The jiggling sunshine leaves of Northwest breeze seemed bred to rejoice. The upper snows on the horizon, the trackless, seemed cradled and warm. Everything was everlastingly loose and responsive, it was all everywhere beyond the truth, beyond *emptyspace* blue.²⁸⁰

As in *On the Road*, these portmanteaus preserve intense descriptive detail. In *Big Sur* the author explains one of the motivations behind his heavily descriptive prose. He laments the fact that “the world hasnt any chance to produce say a writer whose life could really actually touch all this life in every detail”²⁸¹.

Despite these adorned passages, Kerouac was critical of *The Dharma Bums*. In a 1958 letter to Joyce Glassman Kerouac said of the book, “It has only one flaw, towards the end, a kind of anticlimax. It doesnt have a mad climactic moment like

²⁷⁹ Kerouac is referring to the Buddhist concept of “emptiness” or “vacuity” (*shūnyatā* in Sanskrit). I will try to briefly outline this concept here, as it supports an important alternative reading of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose method. *Shūnyatā* refers to the “emptiness” of all phenomena, including that of the self. The teaching of Buddhist vacuity tries to redress the Western belief that the stable, solitary self exists within a stable, separate world, and that interactions between the two result in portrayals of that world where there is a clear dichotomy between subject and object. To give a general overview, Buddhist teaching questions this separation, and suggests that the subject and object cannot be separated from each other. Similarly, they cannot be disassociated from the relationship that links them. Instead, all three are continuously connected and always affecting each other. Therefore, the world is not a stable constant, and cannot exist without the self that perceives it, or without the connection that links the two. The same can be said about the “self”, which is “essentially ‘empty’ of substance and permanence” (Franca Bellarsi, “Jack Kerouac’s Buddhism in *Some of the Dharma: A not so Simple Story*,” *Belgian Essays on Language and Literature* [2000]: 3). Bellarsi suggests that Kerouac was particularly interested in this “emptiness” because “be it as a result of his literary ‘failures’ or personal ones, [he] needed to find a system of belief that would allow him to cope with an individual sense of self that was becoming more cumbersome” (Bellarsi, 2000, 5). For example, the first verse of Kerouac’s, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* explains to the reader that “There are not two of us here, reader and writer, but one, one golden eternity, One-Which-It-Is, That-Which-Everything-Is” (Jack Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* [1960; repr., San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994(b)], 23). In verse six the poet distances himself from the cumbersome sense of self described by Bellarsi when he explains that “Strictly speaking, there is no me, because all is emptiness. I am empty, I am non-existent. All is bliss” (Kerouac, 1994[b], 25). Bellarsi also rightly suggests that the Buddhist emphasis on the transformation of the self provided Kerouac with answers that his Catholic beliefs could not (Bellarsi, 2000, 7). It is important to note that Kerouac also applied these beliefs to his own theories of literary production. In a 2003 article, Bellarsi links Kerouac’s understanding of Buddhist “emptiness” with his spontaneous prose method: “Buddhist ‘emptiness’ and the deceiving nature of phenomena processed by cognitively limited senses would be at the root of the Beats’ striving for ‘spontaneous’ composition and of their attempt to bridge the gap between subject and object, to reduce the time lag between the actual moment of perception and its couching on the page” (Bellarsi, 2000, 29-30). Given this understanding of Kerouac’s Buddhist beliefs, it should be acknowledged that whilst Kerouac’s heavily descriptive prose style does reflect the trappings of late capitalist consumer culture, it is also indebted to a search for a Buddhist “emptiness” that opposes an obsession with material goods. Once again, I suggest that it is mesmerizing tensions such as these that are responsible for the enduring fascination with Kerouac’s work, which frequently presents a narrator positioned uncomfortably between his consumerist and spiritual preoccupations.

²⁸⁰ Kerouac, 2007, 188, my emphasis.

²⁸¹ Kerouac, 2006, 53.

ROAD.”²⁸² Chapter One explored how *On the Road*’s cyclical structure mirrors the patterns of creative destruction that encouraged overconsumption. Without this cyclical momentum, *The Dharma Bums* fails to settle into a captivating rhythm, instead devoting long passages to introspective musings²⁸³ interspersed with scenes of wild socialising²⁸⁴, ending, as the author states, without any real climax. Additionally, the “kicks” Kerouac experiences alongside Snyder usually differ to those he experienced with Neal Cassady. In a desperate letter to Snyder, dated 1957, Kerouac begs his friend to teach him how to find value and sustenance in everyday life, rather than the frantic lifestyle associated with Neal:

After all this world travel I feel infinitely dreary and dont know what to get excited about any more and cant live without exuberance...Maybe you got hints for me, about how to laugh at everything that moves?²⁸⁵

At times, one might question whether Kerouac was poking fun at his own attempts to “get high” on such (comparatively) ineffectual substances. This exchange between Japhy and Ray, for example, might be met with a wry smile, especially in the context of the retrospective confession of a failure to maintain such a devout lifestyle that opens the book:

“Did you ever read the Book of Tea?” said he.

“No, what’s that?”

“It’s a scholarly treatise on how to make tea utilizing all the knowledge of two thousand years about tea-brewing. Some of the descriptions of the effect of the first sip of tea, and the second, and the third, are really wild and ecstatic.”

“Those guys got high on nothing, hey?”

“Sip your tea and you’ll see; this is good green tea.” It was good and I immediately felt calm and warm.²⁸⁶

However good the tea may be, it cannot function as a long-term replacement for the lifestyle documented in *On the Road* and *Big Sur*, as critic Warren French comments:

Joy seems to be found only in those fleeting moments when Kerouac or his various alter egos are transported out of the valley of sorrows by listening to favourite jazz musicians or during the few electric minutes

²⁸² Kerouac, 1999, 119.

²⁸³ For example, chapters 19-21.

²⁸⁴ Chapter 28.

²⁸⁵ Kerouac, 1999, 43.

²⁸⁶ Kerouac, 2007, 20.

before the pot takes over and the conversation drifts into incoherence ... Such joy is a very fleeting and fragile thing. No wonder that Kerouac could never really give himself up to Buddhist teachings as Gary Snyder did and stop drinking as Snyder pleaded with him to do.²⁸⁷

Extending chronologically beyond *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels* provides a more explicit example of a narrator's interaction with late capitalist consumer culture. In fact, almost as soon as he descends from Desolation Peak, Duluoz returns to romanticising the automobile which, as in *On the Road*, can here be interpreted as a synecdoche for the wider capitalist consumer culture that Jack yearns to return to:

there's a long silence as the good car zings along and I am being ferried to the other shore by Nirmanakaya, Samboghakaya and Dharmakaya Buddhas all Three, really One²⁸⁸, with my arm draped over the right hand door and the wind blowing in my face (and from sensation-excitement of seeing the *Road* after months among the rocks)²⁸⁹.

Fascination with automobiles (and subsequently with the benefit of the wider consumer capitalist culture) also registers in *The Dharma Bums* where, despite being in the company of Japhy, Ray is still clearly relieved to descend from the mountain back into mainstream consumer society, as symbolised by the cherished, ever-present automobile which sits at the end of the trail waiting for him:

the trail was fun coming down and yet at one point I was as tired as ever, more than in that endless valley of boulders, but you could see the lake lodge down below now, a sweet little lamp of light and so it didn't matter. Morley and Japhy were talking a blue streak and all we had to do was roll on down to the car. In fact suddenly, as in a happy dream, with the suddenness of waking up from an endless nightmare and it's all over, we were striding across the road and there were

²⁸⁷ French, 126.

²⁸⁸ Kerouac references the Trikāya teaching (or Shānshēn in Japanese), a Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching. The Trikāya doctrine teaches that a Buddha has three bodies, or kāyas, which Kerouac mentions here. The doctrine teaches students that a Buddha is one with the absolute but manifests in the world of form and appearance to work towards the liberation of all sentient beings. The three kāyas are known as Nirmānakāya, Sambogakāya, and Dharmakāya.

Dharmakāya refers to the essence of all things. It is known as the true body which embodies the principle of enlightenment and has no limits or boundaries. Sambogakāya is the body of bliss, the body that experiences the fruits of Buddhist practice. It is also the body that aids communion between Dharmakāya and Nirmānakāya, which is the earthly, physical kāya of a Buddha. This is the body which manifests in time and space to teach the dharma and help all sentient beings find enlightenment. In this quotation from *Desolation Angels*, however, Kerouac feels he is aided by all three as he escapes Desolation Peak in a speeding car.

²⁸⁹ Kerouac, 1995(a), 121.

houses and there were automobiles parked under trees and Morley's car was sitting right there.²⁹⁰

Even in this company, the relief is palpable. There is also a particularly interesting passage in the second chapter of *The Dharma Bums*, where Ray Smith savours the remembered delights of automobile travel and all its accompanying joys:

I first saw [Japhy] walking down the street in San Francisco the following week (after hitchhiking the rest of the way from Santa Barbara in one long zipping ride given me, as though anybody'll believe this, by a beautiful darling young blonde in a snow-white strapless bathing suit and barefooted with a gold bracelet on her ankle, driving a next-year's cinnamon-red Lincoln Mercury, who wanted benzedrine so she could drive all the way to the City and when I said I had some in my duffel bag yelled "Crazy!") – I saw Japhy loping along in that curious long stride of a mountainclimber²⁹¹.

Readers again identify the joy found in "zipping" rapidly across the road, satisfying that chronic itch identified by Vance Packard. Kerouac's excitement in encountering "next-year's" model is also recognisable. The same excitement registered in his description of Dean Moriarty arriving in 1948 behind the wheel of a 1949 Hudson. However, Kerouac's attachment to automobiles is exhibited not only in the savouring of details, such as "next-year's cinnamon-red Lincoln Mercury". The interjection of this memory comes at an important moment, interrupting Smith's description of his first encounter with Japhy. Syntactically this reflects the fact that his complicity with the late capitalist consumer lifestyle (symbolised here by his fascination with the automobile) would eventually come between Kerouac and the lifestyle that Snyder advocated.

The opposing influences of Japhy Ryder and Cody Pomeray

The previous chapter considered how Snyder might have been characterised as a "fulfilled Moriarty". Despite Dean and Japhy's real life counterparts having little to do with each other, the Duluo Legend contains an unfolding power struggle, in which the fictitious counterparts of Gary and Neal try to usurp each other as mentor to the various narrators. In her introduction to *The Dharma Bums* Ann Douglas outlines the important differences between the real men behind these characters:

²⁹⁰ Kerouac, 2007, 78.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 12.

It is still hardly surprising that Snyder and Cassady, despite the overlapping circles they moved in, never became friends. ... An autodidact, Cassady's politics didn't go much beyond dodging and outwitting any law that impeded his prodigious motion; Snyder was a well-educated and articulate intellectual who had tangled with the sterile communism-versus-capitalism debate of the times to emerge an anarchist ... Cassady was impulse incarnate; Snyder thought that excess desire, whether for material goods or epistemological certainties, was the source of suffering.²⁹²

Certainly, for a time Kerouac portrays Snyder as an antidote to Cassady's exhausting lifestyle. However, once again, it is important to remember that Kerouac is not writing straightforwardly autobiographical accounts. Indeed, Kerouac could be accused of idealizing Snyder as Japhy Ryder, portraying him as a flawless spiritual guide²⁹³. Snyder himself later stated that Japhy was an embellished product of Jack's imagination, and should not be taken as a realistic portrait.²⁹⁴ However, by presenting Japhy in this idealised manner, Kerouac created a character that could function as an antidote to the powerful influence of Cody Pomeray. Indeed, Cody barely features in *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac does mention seeing him at the Gallery Six scene, but the inclusion only demonstrates how greatly his influence has waned. No longer the fascinating hero, Cody is introduced only as the partner of Rosie Buchanan who "just stood behind her with both arms around her waist."²⁹⁵ It seems Japhy made somewhat of a fraternal cuckold of Cody, temporarily steering Ray Smith towards a more meditative lifestyle that eschews capitalist mainstream consciousness. James T. Jones comments that

Cassady's absence is ... conspicuous in *The Dharma Bums* ... where Kerouac substituted Gary Snyder as his new hero. Cassady was historically on the scene for the events described in that novel, which came toward the end of Kerouac's Buddhist period, but fictional selectivity of another more hostile variety eliminated from the reader's attention an anti-Buddhist figure.²⁹⁶

As Jones highlights, *The Dharma Bums* is not a straightforward autobiography, but a fictionalised account that exaggerates the author's own belief in the abilities of his Buddhist mentor. However, in *Big Sur* readers witness the moment where Cody Pomeray (and all that he symbolises) triumphs over any of the sensibilities Jarry Wagner

²⁹² Ann Douglas in Kerouac, 2007, xi.

²⁹³ See previous chapter for some the problems attached to Snyder's spiritual and cultural projects.

²⁹⁴ Kerouac, 1999, 213.

²⁹⁵ Kerouac, 2007, 17.

²⁹⁶ Jones, 30.

might have instilled in Jack Duluo. Cody announces himself in apocalyptic, angelic style half way through the novel and Jack welcomes him with open arms:

Suddenly, boom, the door of the cabin is flung open with a loud crash and a burst of sunlight illuminates the room and I see an Angel standing arm outstretched in the door! – It's Cody! ... It's such an incredible sight and surprise that both Pat and I rise from our chairs involuntarily, like we've been lifted up in awe, or scared, tho I dont feel scared so much as ecstatically amazed as tho I've seen a vision ... Cody's oldfashioned family tiptoe sneak carries that strange apocalyptic burst of gold he somehow always manages to produce, like I said elsewhere the time in Mexico he drove an old car over a rutted road very slowly as we were all high on tea and I saw golden Heaven, or the other times he's always seemed so golden like as I say in a davenport of some sort in Heaven in the golden top of Heaven.²⁹⁷

Nowhere in the Duluo Legend does Snyder evoke that kind of ecstatic response in Kerouac, who also describes the encounter in a letter to Cassidy dated September 1960:

Why man when you blatted open that door in big sur and stood there with yr various blondes and blonds it was amazing, i felt like, well it was dark in the cabin remember and me and mc clure was talking and you sneaked up and suddenly when the door was burst open all the light came in and you stood there all 5 of you like archangels but you most of all goddamit face it you looked like an archangel with arm extended as you had –

and then when you told me how beautiful everything had worked out and we walked down the trail bliazast to the fence (ing) it felt like the old days when things used to work out for both of us anyway no matter what happened²⁹⁸.

In both the fictionalised and autobiographical accounts, Neal is described as an angel or an archangel haloed in light, a symbol of Jack's enduring Catholic faith. It is in part his adherence to Catholicism that prevents Kerouac from committing fully to the Buddhist lifestyle advocated by Snyder. In a 1959 letter to Phil Whalen, Kerouac writes that “the Buddhist notion that Ignorance caused the world leaves me cold now, because I feel the presence of angels,”²⁹⁹ perhaps indicating that he cannot relinquish his faith in a fundamentally theistic belief system, a doctrine which does not merge comfortably with non-theistic Buddhism. In an article examining Kerouac's *Some of the Dharma*, Franca Bellarsi explains that “although he is most of the time aware of the fundamental

²⁹⁷ Kerouac, 2006, 97-8.

²⁹⁸ Kerouac, 1999, 306.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 237.

differences between Buddhism and Christianity, Kerouac cannot totally give up his Catholic heritage”³⁰⁰. Bellarsi also points out that for Kerouac, as “a pioneer figure in the post World-War II dialogue between East and West, there was no easy access to teachers in the U.S., and in the history of Buddhism only very few have been able to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha by themselves.”³⁰¹ When Snyder left for Japan Kerouac was left without his only Buddhist teacher. In a letter from February, 1959, Kerouac confessed to Snyder that his dedication to the Dharma Bums lifestyle had lapsed:

anyway what’s important to me now, is that I’ve become soft and have abandoned my rucksacking bummism, which is bad, and if I go to Japan and join you I would like to make it again, in the hills, or alone.³⁰²

As Kerouac’s biographer Ann Charters explains, “his interest in Buddhism, alive and expanding in 1955 with Gary Snyder, had diminished in 1960 to the point where he implied he was sick of the subject.”³⁰³ With Snyder on another continent, Kerouac seemed to abandon the “devout” Buddhist lifestyle, a sentiment he expressed in the same 1959 letter to Phil Whalen:

[Snyder] sez he’ll be in Kyoto at least 2 years, s’got a koan to work on from Oda Roshi. Sez “amazing process, dumb as a newborn baby.”
Myself, the dharma is slipping away from my consciousness and I can’t think of anything to say about it any more. I still read the Diamond Sutra, but as in a dream now. Don’t know what to do.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Bellarsi, 2000, 9.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 13.

³⁰² Kerouac, 1999, 214.

³⁰³ Charters, 337.

³⁰⁴ Kerouac, 1999, 236-7. However, Snyder’s absence is not the only reason for Kerouac’s abandonment of Buddhism. As I have already explored, Kerouac faced the difficult prospect of reconciling his long-standing Catholicism with his new-found Buddhist beliefs. It has been noted that Kerouac did not have access to Buddhist teachers. However, Franca Bellarsi points out that Kerouac’s contemporaries Snyder, Whalen, and Ginsberg “had enough inner resources eventually to seek out the teacher(s) whom they needed” (Bellarsi, 2000, 13). Why then was Kerouac not able to go in search of his own instructor? One of the factors that prevented Kerouac from leaving America was his often stifling relationship with his mother. His reluctance to leave Mémère when Snyder left for Japan is evidenced in several letters from 1959. For example, in a January 8 letter to literary agent Stirling Lord, Kerouac says “I want you to know that I feel a great responsibility to my mother, house and cats” (Kerouac, 1999, 202). Similar worries crop up two days later when he writes to Philip Whalen, telling him that “Mémère is a grande dame in her home but she looks lonely as usual” (Ibid., 202). Following this just a couple of paragraphs later, Kerouac states that “I’m not a Buddhist any more, I’m not anything, I don’t care. I do care about hearts” (Ibid., 203). On January 29 he writes to his sister, Caroline, and yet again expresses the same worries about leaving his mother: “Mémère is lonely when I leave the house even for a few days...there’s a lot of travelling I want to do and I cant leave Mémère alone in this big lonely cold house” (Ibid., 204-5). It would seem that for Kerouac, the pressures presented by his family prevent him from seeking Buddhist enlightenment in the way Ginsberg, Whalen, and Snyder were able to.

Snyder's fictional counterparts also faded: in *Big Sur* his fictional counterpart Jarry Wagner is mentioned only twice.³⁰⁵ In *Desolation Angels* it is once again an automobile with Cody behind the wheel that ensures Duluoz's return to the corporate liberal consumer culture, despite the months spent in contemplation atop the mountain:

Cody bats the little bar around unmercifully, he swings around corners perfectly and fast, no squealing, he darts thru traffic, curses, barely beats lights jams up hills in grinding second, swishes thru intersections, takes the blame, balls out to the Golden Gate bridge where finally (toll paid) we go zooming across the Gate of Dreams ... Old Cody again! Old Visions-of-Cody Cody, the maddest one (as you'll see) and as ever on our left the vast blue trackless Maw Pacific, Mother of Seas and Peaces, leading out to Japan –

It's all too much, I feel wonderful and wild, I've found my friends and a great vibration of living joy and of Poetry is running thru us.³⁰⁶

Jarry Wagner's message is obliterated in a cloud of exhaust fumes, as Jack chases off on another road voyage. An image at the very beginning on *Big Sur* demonstrates this loss of direction perfectly:

There's my hopeful rucksack all neatly packed with everything necessary to live in the woods ... But the rucksack sits hopefully in a strewn mess of bottles all empty, empty poorboys of white port, butts, junk, horror.³⁰⁷

Like Japhy's dream of a dharma-bum generated rucksack revolution, the "hopeful rucksack" has been abandoned by Duluoz. As in *On the Road*, *Big Sur* is peppered with moments of exhilarating automobile travel. Many of these moments are associated with Cody, who arrives at the cabin with a "magenty, slamelty, a jeepster station-wagon ... a perfect beauty ... with a beautiful radio, a brand new set of backup light, thisa and thata down to the perfect new tires and that wonderful shiny paint job."³⁰⁸ When they return to the cabin with renewed liquor supplies, Jack revels in the sensation of flying across the road by Cody's side once again:

Time to go back to the cabin and fly down that dark highway the way only Cody can fly (even bettern Dave Wain but you feel safer with Dave Wain tho the reason Cody gives you a sense of dooming boom

³⁰⁵ Kerouac, 2006, 59 and 148.

³⁰⁶ Kerouac, 1995(a), 162.

³⁰⁷ Kerouac, 2006, 10.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 98.

as he pushes the night out the wheels is not because he'll lose control of the car but you feel the car will take off suddenly up to Heaven or at least just up into what the Russians call the Dark Cosmos, there's a booming rushing sound out the window when Cody bats her down the white line at night, with Dave Wain it's all conversation and smooth sailing, with Cody it's a crisis about to get worse)³⁰⁹.

The joy Duluoze feels is even greater when he and Cody set out alone after Evelyn's³¹⁰ ill-fated play. The ecstasy that marks the start of voyages in *On the Road* is repeated here once again as Jack glories in Cody's manipulation of the speeding car:

So of old we're alone in a car at night bashing down the line to a specific somewhere ... That white line is feeding into our fender like an anxious impatient electronic quiver shuddering in the night and how beautifully sometimes it curves one side or the other as he smoothly swerves for passing or for something else, avoiding a bump or something³¹¹

However, whilst these old distractions are prevalent in the main body of *Big Sur*'s prose, they are absent from the poem "Sea: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur", which is appended to the prose³¹². Aside from the description of the waves' noise as "the ocean motor", there is nothing that might refer to the speeding cars piloted by Cody. Additionally, none of the noises or images are strikingly Catholic in the way the description of Cody's entrance at Big Sur was. Instead, Kerouac spatters the text with references to the eastern cultures that informed his study of Buddhism.³¹³ James T. Jones suggests that, in contrast to the "alcoholic disaster retold in the novel", Kerouac "musters his Buddhist resources to make an assertion of success"³¹⁴ in his experimental poem. Indeed, there are several points within "Sea", where the poet asserts his successful annihilation of a cumbersome Western sense of self, as he did in *Some of the Dharma* and *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*³¹⁵. For example, he proposes that "My golden empty soul'll/ outlast yr salty sill"³¹⁶. Elsewhere he claims "The sea is We ...the sea is

³⁰⁹ Kerouac, 2006, 104.

³¹⁰ The fictional counterpart of Neal's wife, Carolyn Cassady.

³¹¹ Kerouac, 2006, 109.

³¹² Ibid., 169-188.

³¹³ For example, "Bashô" on 175, "Fujiyama" on 177 and Maudgalyāyana (who was considered the second of the Śākyamuni Buddha's closest disciple) on 187. Some small sections of the long poem (such as the following) also resemble Kerouac's haiku or "pops": "Chinese are/ the waves – the woods/ are dreaming" (172).

³¹⁴ Jones, 17-8.

³¹⁵ See footnote 280.

³¹⁶ Kerouac, 2006, 187

me - / We are the sea”³¹⁷, redressing the belief that a solitary self exists separately from the world around it. Unlike his fictionalised but still autobiographic prose, in “Sea” it is impossible to secure a narrative arc within the swirling onomatopoeic seascape (although the narrator does offer an identity within the poem: “Mon nom es Lebris/ de Keroack”³¹⁸). It would appear that poetry liberates Kerouac from the autobiographical aims of his Duluo Legend, and that by slipping away from his burdensome identity Kerouac manages to reject many of his old addictions.

The heavy use of onomatopoeia in “Sea” is also important. As in his spontaneous prose, Kerouac collects words into great associative piles:

...Shore –
 Shaw – Shoo – Oh soft sigh
 we wait hair twined like
 larks – Pissit – Rest not
 - Plottit, bisp tesh, cashes³¹⁹

However, in “Sea” this torrent of words reflects the impermanence of the sea and the natural world, not the 1950s overproduction that the adjectives and compounds of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose threaten to recreate. The swathes of particularly onomatopoeic words reflect an ephemeral natural world that cannot be defined and pinned down and, therefore, cannot be easily commoditised.

Additionally, in “Sea” and in some of his other poetry, Kerouac creates a remarkably short, even economic line, quite unlike the lengthy sentences that feature in his prose. Describing the verses of *Mexico City Blues*, for example, James T. Jones mentions Kerouac’s “economy of diction”³²⁰, enforced in part by his practice of limiting his poems to the size of a notebook page. This stylistic shift not only provides a contrast to Kerouac’s prose, but also to the poetry of some of his closest contemporaries, such as Ginsberg who, particularly in *Howl*, favoured a long and expansive line. “Sea” is economical in its language, as evidenced in lines such as “How sweet/ the earth, yells sand!/ Xcept when tumble/ boom!”³²¹ Both the form and content of “Sea” demonstrate that Kerouac was capable of shaking off the influence of creative destruction and creating experimental work almost untouched by the capitalist influence. However, the almost contemporaneous composition of “Sea” and the prose of *Big Sur* demonstrate

³¹⁷ Kerouac, 2006, 174-7.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 170.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 171

³²⁰ Jones, 165.

³²¹ Kerouac, 2006, 177.

that, when writing prose Kerouac did not disguise his complicity with consumerism, despite his skilfully experimental poetry providing a counterpoint to this.

The end of the road.

Kerouac's novels and letters contain many resolutions to commit to a more wholesome, meditative existence. In a letter to Ginsberg dated June, 1959, his distress is apparent: "I could see with my own eyes what all this lionized manure has done to me; it's killing me rapidly. I have to escape or die, don't you see."³²² In *Big Sur* Kerouac describes the tragedies and temptations that lead him back toward his old addictions as "signposts"³²³, leading back to the eternal, inescapable road that functions as a representation for the distractions of the corporate liberal consumer society of mid twentieth-century America. The books that result from this despair are laments for corporate liberal America not, as readers and critics have sometimes assumed, countercultural instruction manuals. In 2009 Daniel Barnett appraised the continued misreading of Kerouac's work. Barnett rightly states that Kerouac "never set himself up as the champion of a nation-changing revolutionary counterculture"³²⁴. Previous chapters have explored how Kerouac is often accused of being the spokesman for a countercultural generation³²⁵: as noted earlier, Daniel Belgrad went so far as to describe *On the Road* as "the guidebook for a restless 'beat generation.'"³²⁶ However, other critics such as Kerouac's contemporary Seymour Krim, understood that Kerouac should be valued because he "expressed mutual experience that had been hushed up or considered improper for literature."³²⁷ Krim rightly argues that Kerouac

is a social historian as well as a technical inventor, and his ultimate value to the future may very well lie in this area. No one in American prose before Kerouac, not even Hemingway, has written so authentically about an entirely new pocket of sensibility and attitude within the broad overcoat of society.³²⁸

³²² Kerouac, 1999, 239.

³²³ Kerouac, 2006, 36-7.

³²⁴ Daniel Barnett, "Misremembering Jack Kerouac," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2009.

³²⁵ See also Swartz, 37 and Paes de Barros, 228.

³²⁶ Belgrad, 196.

³²⁷ Seymour Krim in Kerouac, 1995(a), 10.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-9.

Sensitive to the common assumptions made about Kerouac, John Tytell explains to his readers that although Kerouac witnessed and was greatly troubled by the late capitalist consumer culture that surrounded him, unlike Snyder³²⁹ he could not see a plausible long term escape route:

he expressed extraordinary sensitivity to the nascent tensions, emerging mores, and the beginnings of a new consciousness in American life, recording the darker aspects of conformity and materialism even as he anticipated and charted the changes in lifestyle that were only to be realized during his declining years, and which were to bewilder him as much as anyone else.³³⁰

In the decade that followed the emergence of the beat generation both Kerouac and Snyder influenced the countercultural literature of the sixties and seventies. Snyder's ecologically informed writing was echoed and expanded on by many such as Rachel Carson, Ernest Callenbach, and Murray Bookchin³³¹. The sixties also saw the first publication of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Published by Stewart Brand, a writer and an associate of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters group, the catalogue listed (but did not sell) products deemed to be useful to those seeking to live a creative, self-sustainable lifestyle, as advocated by Snyder in essays such as "Four Changes".

Kerouac had a more complex relationship with the writers he influenced. Years after the author's death, his contemporary and friend William Burroughs discussed the author's unintended influence in an interview with Lewis McAdams for the film *What Happened to Kerouac?*

WB: He started a cultural revolution of unprecedented worldwide extent.

LM: Yet he didn't even acknowledge it?

WB: Well, he didn't acknowledge it but he was one of the people instrumental in starting it.

LM: I mean, in what sense?

³²⁹ It must be reiterated here that although Snyder prepared a manifesto for socio-cultural change, his plans were at times problematic, and sometimes over-optimistic. A more detailed exploration of the problems surrounding Snyder's cultural project can be found throughout Chapter 3.

³³⁰ Tytell, 140-1.

³³¹ Rachel Carson was an American conservationist, and author of the seminal environmentalist work, *Silent Spring* (1962). To some extent, her career pre-dates Snyder's, but both worked to further the cause of the environmentalist movement across the globe. Ernest Callenbach was the author of *Ecotopia* (1975) and other similar titles. *Ecotopia* is a novel which describes an ecological utopia in which citizens seek to strike a balance between themselves and nature. Murray Bookchin was a socialist philosopher, and pioneer of the green movement. Amongst other titles, he produced *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (1982, updated in 2005).

WB: Well the whole Beat movement, which has become a worldwide cultural revolution, absolutely unprecedented, there's never been anything like it before ... their affiliation with the political activists, all that went on in the sixties, the beats were originally non-political. Uh, others who were political were really following the Beat movement to its logical conclusion.

LM: But Kerouac didn't seem to have any sense of that or desire for it or acceptance of it?

WB: Well, no he didn't, he was completely apolitical. I don't think he ever took part in a demonstration or signed a petition.³³²

Amongst the many writers influenced by Kerouac are Tom Wolfe, Ken Kesey, and later, Hunter S. Thompson, who himself offered an account of what he perceived to be the failure of the 1960s countercultural movement in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1972). Like Kerouac, Wolfe and Thompson both produced their own versions of a road narrative (with Kesey being one of the principal characters in Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*). Unlike Kerouac however, their writing focused heavily on the liberating, countercultural potential of psychedelic drugs such as LSD. Kerouac was clearly uncomfortable with being connected to these sixties countercultural writers. His cold reception of Ken Kesey is particularly well documented. Literary agent to both men, Sterling Lord described their one meeting in his article "When Kerouac Met Kesey":

There was absolutely no serious or colorful discussion between Kesey and Kerouac. Jack was never loud, or critical, or indignant. He seemed tired, but he was patient with the Pranksters' antics. Still, an hour after he came, he left. In the end, he was uncomfortable with Kesey's overwhelming display of exuberance.³³³

Warren French also comments on the tension Kerouac and Kesey:

Whether Kerouac could recognize it or not, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey had written the heroic account of the triumph of the individual over the system that readers thought they had found in *On the Road*. But Kerouac's work was elegiac and defeatist; whereas Kesey's was defiant and hopeful. Kesey was mistakenly taken for Kerouac's disciple to the vast annoyance of both; no wonder Kerouac displayed hostility when he contemplated Kesey enjoying so quickly the success that he had waited for so long and then so little enjoyed, as

³³² Richard Lerner and Lewis McAdams, *What Happened to Kerouac? The Jack Kerouac Story*, DVD, directed by Richard Lerner and Lewis McAdams (Orpington: Delta Music PLC, 2005).

³³³ Sterling Lord, "When Kerouac Met Kesey," *The American Scholar*, Autumn 2011, <http://theamericanscholar.org/when-kerouac-met-kesey/#.UYPRwkrheSo> (accessed May 3 2013).

well as Kesey promoting a kind of anarchic activism that disturbed Kerouac's basically passive personality.³³⁴

Whilst Kesey was certainly not a "disciple" of Kerouac, both writers dealt extensively with the oppression of the mid twentieth-century American citizen, and certain similarities can be found between *On the Road* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. For example, Manuel Luis Martinez comments that Kesey and Kerouac "share an antipathy toward the subjectifying power of a capitalist hegemony", although the writers portray this hegemonic power in different ways. Martinez also argues that rather than attempting to alter an entire society, both writers "ultimately endorse a separatism that places the self (individually or communally defined) in isolation, abdicating one's role in the shaping of a national culture."³³⁵ This is true of Kerouac, who I shall demonstrate clearly outlined his a-political stance. Whilst Kesey may have engaged with a wider audience as part of the Merry Pranksters, his endorsement of psychedelic drugs would certainly have limited his appeal in a more mainstream audience.

Additionally, Neal Cassady links the two writers. Cassady was an important member of Kesey's Merry Pranksters group, driving their bus across America at his usual breakneck speed, as described by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*:

Cassady is revved up like they've never seen him before, with his shirt off, a straw version of a cowboy hat on his head, bouncing up and down on the driver's seat, shifting gears – doubledy-clutch, doubled-clutch, blaming on the steering wheel and the gearshift box, rapping over the microphone rigged up by his seat like a manic tour guide, describing every car going by³³⁶.

Discussing their one meeting, Martinez describes how Kerouac and Kesey were (perhaps uncomfortably) linked by Cassady:

Kerouac and Kesey, avatars of the postwar cultural revolution, sitting together, while their mutual friend Neal Cassady, the driver, the personification of liberating movement and prince of drift, is caught in the middle. Kesey at the height of his popularity, Kerouac at the nadir of his. Kesey saw his mission as a continuation of what Kerouac had set in motion in the 1950s. Kerouac saw the hippies as mindless, communisic, rude, unpatriotic, and soulless.³³⁷

³³⁴ French, 21.

³³⁵ Martinez, 201.

³³⁶ Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968; repr., London: Black Swan, 1989), 70-1.

³³⁷ Martinez, 111.

Beyond this social connection, both authors also create characters that resemble the vivacious Cassady. Kerouac's Dean Moriarty (and Cody Pomeroy) is of course a direct (if perhaps exaggerated) portrait of Cassady, but Kesey's protagonist Randle McMurphy also shares several characteristics with Cassady. McMurphy is described by Martinez as a "white, masculine, mobile...free-thinking hero", a description that might easily be applied to Dean Moriarty, for whom mobility continually provides escapism and exhilaration. In his essay on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Thomas H. Flick also describes McMurphy's "apparently inexhaustible vitality"³³⁸, a characteristic often attributed to Moriarty in *On the Road*³³⁹. Both Moriarty and McMurphy are virile, charismatic men that are mobile, but only within a fixed system. Whilst Moriarty's mobility is linked to the oppressive late-capitalist system, McMurphy is more explicitly limited by the physical confines of his asylum, a difference that Martinez points out:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, provides the link between 1950s cultural protest and the "more radical" protest movements of the 1960s. In his novel, the threat to the individual comes from the institution. Whereas Kerouac and Burroughs suggest more oblique, insidious forces, Kesey places the individual at the mercy of systematic institutionalization³⁴⁰.

Given these similarities, it is not surprising that some of the criticisms levelled at Kerouac can also be addressed to Kesey. For example, Kesey's heavy consumption of psychedelic drugs makes him an example of another social movement which could not completely escape the pitfalls of the late capitalist system; I have already discussed the "hip capitalism" that developed around the Psychedelic Shop located on Haight Street which sold (amongst other things) a wide collection of drug paraphernalia, thus quietly co-opting the psychedelic movement into the late capitalist consumer system³⁴¹.

Whilst there are clearly similarities between Kerouac and Kesey, Kerouac did not appreciate being linked to the counterculture that Kesey was a prominent part of, or to its left wing politics. Just a year after the publication of *On the Road* Kerouac emphatically stated in a letter to Ginsberg, "I DON'T WANT NOTHIN TO DO WITH POLITICS

³³⁸ Thomas H. Flick, "The Hipster, the Hero, and the Psychic Frontier in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 43, no.1/2 (1989): 24.

³³⁹ See 128, where Dean says to Marylou, "you know that I'm hotrock capable of everything at the same time and I have unlimited energy", 47 where the narrator explains "Dean was all energies and ready to go", or 165 where Dean is described as a "hurricane of energy" (Kerouac, 2007).

³⁴⁰ Martinez, 113.

³⁴¹ See footnote 219.

especially leftist West Coast future blood in the street malevolence.”³⁴² This was the opinion he held for the rest of his life, which sometimes prevented him from associating with other members of the original beat generation, as this 1964 letter, sent to an Italian anthologist of Beat poetry illustrates:

I’ve just turned down \$3,000 because I didn’t want to be in the same film with Ginsberg, please do not identify my biography with his, or with Corso’s. They’ve both become political fanatics, both have begun to revile me because I don’t join them in their political opinions ... and I am sick of them and all their beatnik friends.³⁴³

Elsewhere, in a rare reply to fan-mail from 1961, Kerouac attempts to put right an admiring student with what Ann Charters described as a “testy postcard”:

“Original members” of Beat Gen. means it started out in 1948 as a group of poets, beardless, with no political beefs, no idea of “nonconformity”, just poets. Today’s “beatnik” cant even recognize Stan Getz³⁴⁴ [sic] when he hears him, or even tell the tune he’s playing, etc. “Beatniks” are Henry Wallaceniks³⁴⁵ jumped on the movement for leftwing reasons. I am a Catholic Conservative.³⁴⁶

In his 2007 article on Kerouac, Sean O’Hagan discusses his own mistaken readings of *On the Road*, which resulted from the carefully cultivated image of the book as “the bible for any aspiring bohemian”:

a book that was passed on from one generation to the next almost as a talismanic text. I was given a battered copy by an older friend and, even before I read it, knew that it carried within its pages some deep, abiding truth about youth, freedom and self-determination. *On the Road* instilled in me a belief that, in order to find oneself, one had to throw caution to the wind and travel long distances with no real goal and very little money.³⁴⁷

Generations of readers have approached Kerouac’s books expecting manuals for countercultural dissent, making assumptions about their content before opening the pages, as Warren French points out in his discussion of *On the Road*:

³⁴² Kerouac, 1999, 115.

³⁴³ Ibid., 429.

³⁴⁴ Stan Getz was an American jazz saxophone player known as “The Sound.”

³⁴⁵ Henry Wallace was the 33rd Vice President of the United States. In the 1948 presidential election, Wallace was the nominee of the Progressive Party.

³⁴⁶ Kerouac, 1999, 324.

³⁴⁷ Sean O’Hagan, “America’s first king of the road,” *Guardian*, August 5, 2007.

Hopeful young readers are likely ... to be inclined to do what he himself did rather than what he tells them to do. *On the Road* is surely a novel that has been more enthusiastically than carefully read.³⁴⁸

Refreshingly, O'Hagan closes his article by explaining the revelations that a later, more mature reading of text can provide:

When I re-read *On the Road* recently, it did indeed seem to me to be a different book. ... surprisingly, there was an undercurrent of great sadness and disillusionment that I had not picked up on, or chosen to overlook, first time around. It seemed, in its final part, to be an elegy for Kerouac and Cassady's youth, for their friendship, which ends in a kind of betrayal, and for the fabled road of the title that had promised so much but, in the end, delivered so little.³⁴⁹

If critics and readers are able to cut through the generations of assumptions surrounding Kerouac's books (and *On the Road* in particular), they will find that both the form and content reflect America as Kerouac saw it in the middle of the twentieth century: an inescapable consumer-driven culture manipulated by wildly accelerated cycles of creative destruction.

³⁴⁸ French, 44.

³⁴⁹ O'Hagan.

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